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COLONEL ENDERBY'S WIFE

COLONEL ENDERBY'S WIFE

A NOVEL

BY

LUCAS MALET

AUTHOR OF

“MRS. LORIMER, A SKETCH IN BLACK AND WHITE”

“Lequel de nous n'a sa terre promise, son jour d'extase, et sa fin dans l'exil?”—AMIEL

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON

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IN SUSPENSE.

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BOOK FIFTH.
IN SUSPENSE.
(*Continued.*)

COLONEL ENDERBY'S WIFE.



CHAPTER VII.

A TEA-PARTY WITH INTERLUDES.

“It will be just too perfectly lovely. You will be a public benefactor Mrs. John Enderby.—That is the right thing to say, isn’t it, Mr. Drake? I feel rather awkward about calling you Mrs. John Enderby; it sounds familiar. I hope you don’t mind what I say sounding familiar? But you will be a public benefactor. You will give us animation. My husband, Ashley Waterfield, says the society of this county is the most perfect thing in the world. Then I think the most perfect thing in the world is wanting in animation. Don’t you think the society here wants animation, now, Mrs. Enderby? You are like me, you come in from the outside; we have not the

advantage of being natives. My husband says it's a great advantage to be a native. I ask him, if it's such a great advantage to be a native, why he did not marry a native, instead of marrying me? And, Colonel Enderby, you didn't marry a native, either. I think there must be advantages in not being a native, too. I am sure there are advantages in animation. Well, now, Colonel Enderby, your wife is what I call very animated. Don't you think it's an advantage, any way?"

The speaker, Mrs. Ashley Waterfield, occupied a chair in Jessie Enderby's drawing-room. It may be added that she occupied it very fully; not that she was a large or overflowing person. Both in face and figure she was not only uneccentric, but decidedly pleasing. She had a way, however, on all occasions of appearing, to present herself voluntarily for public inspection; and of being so pre-eminently aware of her own presence, that others became almost, to themselves, irritatingly aware of it too.

Mrs. Waterfield sat perfectly still in her

chair, with her remarkably small hands in a pretty pose on her lap, and poured forth her stream of statement with extraordinary rapidity, turning her head from side to side, and addressing the different members of her audience in turn. Deportment is a lost art in England. On the other side of the Atlantic it appears still to flourish. Mrs. Waterfield had a great deal of deportment—somewhat of the monthly fashion-plate order, perhaps; but it made an impression, nevertheless, upon certain sections of English society.

“The real difficulty is young men,” said Mrs. Jack Enderby, as soon as a pause enabled her to thrust in a remark. “Young men are always the bother at a ball in the country.”

Mrs. Jack threw back the fronts of her heavy ulster; thereby exhibiting a fine bust, and a waist still possessing claims to neatness, encased in an irreproachably plain well-fitting dress-body of rather loud checks: Augusta Enderby’s action was always large. She was, perhaps, somewhat distressingly healthy in appearance. Her steady colour,

abundant dark hair, bold, though kindly brown eyes, strong voice, and positive movements, gave one an impression of an almost vulgar immunity from those ills that flesh is heir to. She had a decided prejudice in favour of herself and her own possessions, which prejudice had the happy effect of keeping her in a pretty constant good temper. In short, she was, as her husband so often said of her, "a capital good fellow." It may be noted, in passing, that one's admiration for Mrs. Jack had an inclination to find expression in a class of terms usually reserved for members of the stronger sex.

She had driven herself over to the Manor House to-day, with her head full of an important project. The time of mourning for old Matthew Enderby was well over; and Mrs. Jack had it on her mind to make her public entry into local society, in her new character of mistress of one of the best-known places in South Midlandshire, with nothing less than a really good ball. She had come to discuss this question with her pretty sister-in-law, for whose knowledge of how to do things, and capacity for

detail, she possessed a high respect. Then, too, Augusta had a lingering feeling that it was by something of a fluke, after all, that she, instead of the Colonel's fascinating wife, found herself enthroned at Bassett Darcy: and she took, in her large, good-hearted way, such lively satisfaction in her present dignities and possessions, that she, perhaps, somewhat over-estimated Jessie's loss in the matter, and felt particularly anxious to defer as much as possible to her young kinswoman.

Augusta's observation about the difficulty of obtaining young men, opened the flood-gates of Mrs. Waterfield's discourse again very promptly.

"Why," she said, "now, Mrs. John Enderby, there is Ashley to begin with. I know he is married; but you would call him a young man, wouldn't you, though he is married? I call him a young man. He is only four years older than I am, and I am a young woman now, ain't I, Mr. Drake? Of course, if I ask you, you couldn't say I was an old woman; I know that. But I really am a young woman. And then

there is Sokeington. I will speak to Sokeington, Mrs. John Enderby. Sokeington is a very good friend of mine; he must have a house full at Pentstock. There are forty-two bedrooms at Pentstock. He could ask a number of young men down. My cousin, Lewis Vandercrup, is coming to England in January. You said in January, didn't you, Mrs. John Enderby? Sokeington could ask him—I mean Lewis Vandercrup—down to Pentstock too."

"Vandercrup, Vandercrup?" murmured Mr. Drake.

The excellent, little man was sitting, with his knees very far apart, on a settee just opposite the fire,—which had caught his face, as the saying is, and made it even ruddier than usual.

"Vandercrup? Yes, to be sure; remember him perfectly. Met him at Venice in the spring. People said he was one of your American millionaires, don't you know; had got a fabulous sort of a fortune."

"I don't know about fabulous," responded the lady, in her high thin tones. "Fabulous seems to mean something dreadful; some-

thing with two heads. Well, Lewis Vandercrup has not got two heads, any way. He is very nice-looking. Some people say he is rather ordinary; I don't think he is ordinary, unless it is ordinary to be like a gentleman. Lewis Vandercrup is just the most perfect gentleman. Then there is Charlie Colvin. I don't usually call gentlemen by their first names like that. I think it is bad style to do it; bad form, you would say, Mr. Drake.—But Charlie Colvin is a connection of my husband's. I always call my cousins by their first names, and my cousins by marriage too. Well, Mrs. John Enderby, you must ask Charlie Colvin. He is one of Mrs. Enderby's admirers. Eh? Well, I am sure he is a great admirer of yours, Mrs. Enderby."

"Jessie," said the Colonel, getting up from the sofa where he had been sitting, a little way from his wife; "can't I take these teacups for you?"

"Oh yes; give me my tea, Jessie," cried Augusta, cheerily. "I'm as hungry as a hunter after nine miles in the rain."

"Why, have I said anything wrong?"

exclaimed Mrs. Waterfield, looking round intelligently upon her companions. "My husband says I run on so. I suppose I do run on. Do you object to your wife having admirers, then, Colonel Enderby? Well, now, I like admirers. I don't see the use of a woman being so elegant, and perfectly lovely every way, as Mrs. Enderby is, if she mayn't have admirers. Why, what an awful Blue Beard of a husband you must be, Colonel Enderby, if you don't like people to look at your wife. If I had a wife, I should want everybody to look at her all day long.—No, I don't take sugar in my tea, thank you. Till I came to England I never took tea at all. My mother never would let me take tea when I was a young girl. She believed it was bad for the digestion. Now, I don't believe it is bad for the digestion, do you, Mrs. Enderby?"

"Young men, young men?" said Mr. Drake, circulating genially meanwhile with the bread and butter. "No difficulty about them, upon my word, I'm sure. Well, now, there am I for one."

Augusta laughed good-humouredly. She

and Mr. Drake were old friends; and, having a very genuine kindness for each other at bottom, felt themselves at liberty to indulge in mild personalities at moments.

“Yes, there you are,” she said. “But you see, you can’t multiply yourself indefinitely; and even if you could, I’m not sure you would satisfy all the aspirations of all my pretty girls, you know.”

“Bless me, I’m a very good sort of a creature. Surely you could not have too much of me?”

“Oh no, certainly I couldn’t,” responded Augusta, laughing again.

Jessie meanwhile pushed about the tea-cups on the table before her impatiently. She felt slightly irritable. Mrs. Waterfield had monopolized the conversation, and Mr. Drake’s pleasantries always bored her. She had got on a wonderful new tea-gown, with a long train to it, and the most delightful trimming of bobs and beads, and loops of ribbon all down the front, and great frills at the bottom of it, which had the effect of making her feet look particularly small—that was a comfort. But she wanted to

talk seriously with her sister-in-law about the ball; and she could not get in a word edgeways. She looked up at her husband with a charming little demand for pity and sympathy, shrugged her shoulders, and sighed in a quite pathetic manner.

“Oh, I understand you; don't spare me,” Mr. Drake was saying, in answer to some further speech of Mrs. Jack's. “You mean I'm old. I am a good deal more than four years Mrs. Waterfield's senior, anyhow.”

“Well, I guess you are, Mr. Drake,” observed that lady, sharply.

“I tell you what it is, you know. I look in the glass every morning, and say to myself, ‘Drake, my good fellow, you're getting on; turn to, and mend your ways.’ And yet, upon my soul,” he added, sitting down again, nursing one knee, and taking an argumentative tone:—“I don't really feel it. It's a most singular thing, but I don't seem to be able to take it in somehow. I don't feel a day older than I did at twenty. And I tell you what, you know, it's uncommonly interesting, but lots of other men say just the same.—There's Enderby, now,

he's a case in point. You're getting on, you know, Enderby, and I'll be bound you feel every bit as young as you did five and twenty years ago, don't you?"

"Why, I'm sure this must be very encouraging for the rest of us," remarked Mrs. Waterfield, parenthetically.

Mr. Drake's speeches were frequently incoherent, and not generally calculated to leave an impression of mature wisdom on the minds of his hearers, who might readily be led by them to credit the statement, that this middle-aged gentleman found himself in very much the same intellectual atmosphere as that which he had breathed during his crude and ingenuous adolescence. Still, there was a practical sagacity about Edmund Drake that, looking on his round untroubled countenance, and listening to his stumbling speech, one might hardly have given him credit for. As he made his not over-wise appeal to Colonel Enderby, he observed that Jessie turned upon her husband a strangely fixed and inquiring gaze. Quite another woman seemed to look out of the girl's fresh young face for

the moment,—not a pleasant woman, hard, clever, cold-hearted, worldly. Mr. Drake had a quick misgiving; to himself he repeated certain old opinions he had formed on the subject of his friend's marriage.

Fortunately, however, for once in his life, the Colonel did not happen to be thinking about his wife. He raised his eyes with an air of abstraction, and sat slowly pulling at the ends of his moustache for a second or two, before answering. Then he said—

“Alas! Drake, you've hit on the wrong man this time. I shan't serve you as a happy example. I don't feel the least as I did five and twenty years ago, or five months ago, either, for that matter.”

Colonel Enderby's voice had an odd ring in it, which arrested Augusta's attention. She looked rather hard at him.

“Oh, stuff a' nonsense, Philip!” she said in her loud, good-natured way. “I never saw a man wear as well as you do. Poor Jack, now, does begin to show signs, you know. I won't enumerate them—it isn't fair to criticize his weak points behind his back. But you—nonsense!”

"It seems to me we are having a rather graveyard sort of conversation," Mrs. Waterfield said. "I declare what with Mr. Drake here, and Colonel Enderby there, I begin to feel quite blue, that I do. Now, you feel blue too, Mrs. Enderby, don't you? If I was you, I wouldn't let my husband talk in that way. When Ashley says anything like that, I stop him. I tell him he makes me feel real bad. Now, Colonel Enderby, are not you sorry? You have made me feel so badly I shall go home directly. I want you to ring the bell right away, and order my carriage."

Just at this moment Berrington threw the drawing-room door wide open.

"Mrs. Farrell!" he announced, in his half-aggressive manner. And Cecilia, water-proof and all, stood revealed in the doorway.

"Oh my!" cried Mrs. Waterfield, involuntarily.

"Mrs. Farrell! dear me!" Augusta exclaimed, turning round with an air of considerable surprise, and speaking in tones that were perfectly audible.

Philip Enderby rose hastily to his feet—too hastily, in fact, for he had to wait a moment before he could follow his wife across the room to meet the new-comer. He had noted a disagreeable tendency in himself in the last few weeks, which gave him a great deal of annoyance. A small matter would cause him to start and change colour. He had the greatest difficulty in keeping himself in hand, in avoiding speaking sharply and angrily, at times. It seemed to him that all his nerves had got outside his skin, so to speak.

Jessie jumped up with a little cry of pleasure. She swept across the room in her long trailing tea-gown, with the most charming smile of welcome on her pretty face. Why, she hardly knew, but she was immensely glad to see Mrs. Farrell just then.

"This is delightful, Cecilia," she said. "I didn't know you were in England. Have you heard anything of Bertie lately? He has left the red villa, and mamma is a little mysterious about him."

She put up her face, intending to give

Cecilia a kiss in this moment of expansion ; and then, drawing back suddenly, held her petticoats carefully away with one hand.

“ Ah ! you must forgive me, but you are so very wet. Surely you cannot have walked out here in this horrible weather ? ”

Some people certainly seem born to be the sport of unkind circumstance. Poor Mrs. Farrell, her soul purged of all vanity and self-seeking, had set off on her mission in the most purely evangelical spirit. Her imagination had attached itself with clinging tenacity to this interview with Jessie Enderby. She had rehearsed the scene twenty times over in her own mind : but, unfortunately, Cecilia’s mental pictures were painted in neutral tints ; they were sadly lacking in detail, in vivacity of action, and in atmosphere. She had had a vision of herself,—a sort of embodied providence,—earnestly exhorting Jessie,—a serious, grey, and anxious phantom,—to consider the solemnity of the present condition of her devoted husband,—who, in his turn, figured as a vague being, sad and shadowy as any ghostly hero greeted by Odysseus, in the

dreary kingdom of Hades. When she had told the poor woman down in the cottage by the brick-fields, that she was going on to another house where there was trouble, she had spoken honestly out of a strong and simple conviction. Trouble, in her mind, was the great leveller, merging all differences of class and surroundings; bringing human relations out of the transitory and conventional on to the common ground of our common suffering. Her gloomy walk had increased the exaltation of Cecilia's state of mind. Her vision of the coming interview, though wanting in colour, was by no means wanting in strong reality to her.

And now, suddenly, being ushered into this warm, bright, fragrant room; seeing these people with their air of refined well-being and luxury; hearing Mrs. Waterfield's shrill chatter, as she stood arranging herself a little by the fire, and pouring a broadside of concise statement into Mr. Drake and Mrs. Jack Enderby,—Cecilia Farrell suffered a cruel shock and transition of feeling. What went she out for to see?—Pain, sorrow, the dread of coming

tragedy. While that which she did, in fact, seemed to her far more akin to kings' palaces, and the soft raiment usually worn therein. Cecilia felt as though she had fallen from a great height. The whole world turned mean and common around her. She became absorbingly conscious of her own nervousness and agitation, and of the unsightliness of her present costume. She felt how ineffectual, incongruous, almost ridiculous, she must look. She struggled bravely against her humiliation; but it was too strong for her, she sank into a bitter conviction of her own uselessness and incapacity. For, alas! the experience of Saul, the son of Kish, is too often exactly reversed. How many a noble soul starts forth, full of hope, in search of a kingdom: and, instead of the prophet and the promise and the oil of anointing, finds nothing, after all, but those familiar and irritating old animals—his father's asses! Such episodes may be brief in execution; but they are immensely disconcerting.

“Yes, I walked over,” she said humbly, while the fairy palace of her new idea

crumbled into ruins within her. "I wanted very much to see you, Jessie; but I had some places to call at on the way."

She looked down with an expression at once distressed and apologetic at her damp skirts and muddy boots.

"I am so sorry," she went on; "I'm afraid I'm very dirty."

"Mrs. Farrell must take off her cloak, and you must get it dried for her," said the Colonel. "If you're kind enough, Mrs. Farrell, to come out and see my wife in such weather, I'm sure the least she can do is to take good care of you when you get here."

Cecilia glanced at the speaker quickly and gratefully. Then she began fumbling at the buttons of her cloak. Unhappy Cecilia! she was desperately nervous; and all her fingers turned into thumbs.

"I believe I must ask you to go and hurry up the carriage, Mr. Drake," Mrs. Waterfield was, meanwhile, saying. "My husband says I always stay too late when I come to see Mrs. Enderby. Well, I dare say I do. I think Mrs. Enderby just one of the sweetest women I know. Don't you

think her awfully sweet, now? I don't like using that word awfully; I don't think it's ladylike. I suppose I caught it from my husband. I always have been very quick about catching things. My mother always said I had a wonderfully good ear. It is a great thing to have a good ear, now, isn't it, Mrs. John Enderby?"

And so on, and so on. Philip's nerves were on edge. Between Mrs. Waterfield's chatter on one side, and Mrs. Farrell's unsuccessful struggles with her waterproof on the other, he began to feel the position intolerable. He even went so far as to motion Jessie, rather imperatively, to help her guest off with that odious garment; but the young lady merely put up her eyebrows with a charmingly amused expression, looked eloquently at Cecilia's moist clothes, at her own dainty hands, and then back at her husband again. And Philip was just debating whether he had not better go down on his knees before his love of long ago, and fight hand to hand with those obstinate buttons himself, when Augusta Enderby mercifully came to the rescue.

"Here," she cried in her large, capable manner, "let me do it. Your buttons are a size too big for your button-holes, you know, Mrs. Farrell. All right, though, I'll manage them. There you are!" she added, as she whipped off the offending overgarment.

And there indeed was Cecilia, with the pure, self-sacrificing soul of a Puritan saint unseen, and with a long lean person, adorned about the shoulders, too, with a not over-fresh red and white woollen cross-over, quite distinctly seen—hitting you in the face, as you may say, with its lamentable want of elegance and distinction.

"Oh my!" murmured Mrs. Waterfield again, under her breath. Then she announced for the twentieth time that she must go; and after an effusive and comprehensive leave-taking, rustled away—still chattering—deportment and all.

A few minutes later Mrs. Jack made a move.

"Well, my dear, come over and see me as soon as you can," she said, as she kissed her pretty sister-in-law. "We'll

have a good talk about the ball, and really settle things. The last week in January would be best, I think. The hounds meet at Bassett that week, and there's the Slowby Hospital ball on the Wednesday, so we could work it all in nicely. Mind, I reckon on you, Jessie. You're clever, you know, and I'm not."

"If you're driving yourself, I advise you to go the lower way, through Lowcote Park," observed the Colonel, as he helped Augusta on with her ulster. "The road up by Stoney Cross is in an uncommonly bad state, not fit to take horses over at night."

When Mrs. Jack Enderby, followed by the two gentlemen, had left the room, Cecilia felt the hour of her trial had arrived. Jessie had given her some tea; but she was too agitated to drink it. She sat uncomfortably enough on the settee, nursing her cup, which made a little slip and rattle every now and then from the unsteadiness of her hands.

As to Jessie, her rush of enthusiasm for Mrs. Farrell had speedily evaporated under the influences of the melancholy waterproof.

She had found out that Cecilia had been a long while in England, and could give her no fresh news of Bertie Ames. Notwithstanding her delightful tea-gown, the young lady felt, too, that the last hour had not been exactly crowned with success. She was a trifle out of temper; and her irritation took the form of sprightly malice.

She moved across, heaped a couple more logs on to the fire, watched the quick leap of the flame as the flaked edges of the wood touched the glowing bed of coal beneath; and then, turning upon her guest with a brilliant smile, observed—

“You said you wanted very much to see me, Cecilia. Had you anything special to say, because here is an excellent opportunity. We are alone; I am attentive.”

The girl stood in an easy attitude, looking admirably pretty, with her head a trifle on one side, and her eyes fixed on her companion's face.

Prevarication was not Mrs. Farrell's strong point. Everything had gone badly for her, yet she clung with a kind of unfortunate heroism to truth and duty.

“I did want to see you very much, Jessie,” she said, looking up in her tired, troubled way, and speaking with hesitation. “I had something I felt I ought to say to you; but it is so difficult to know how best to say it.”

A mischievous light came into Jessie’s bright eyes. She had something of a child’s thoughtless pleasure in teasing and confusing larger, more helpless creatures than herself.

“Begin at the very beginning, dear Cecilia,” she answered softly, “and go straight on. No doubt, if I attend very carefully I shall eventually understand, even though I am rather a stupid person.”

“I was afraid, from something I had heard, that you might be anxious and distressed, Jessie.”

There was an appeal in the elder woman’s manner; dumbly she implored the girl not to laugh at her.

“And I fancied you might not quite know what to do, being here without Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay, or any old friend to speak to. I thought, perhaps, you would be glad to talk

to a woman you knew—somebody whom you had known a long while. It is easier to say things to an old acquaintance. I don't want to put myself forward," she added hastily; "I only wanted you to make use of me, if there was nobody better."

During the above speech a succession of different expressions crossed Jessie Enderby's face. The merriment passed away; for a moment that painful look of unreasonable terror stared out of it. Then the girl seemed to arrive at a firm determination; she became calm, almost smiling again.

Mrs. Farrell was not in a condition to register, much less to interpret, the meaning of these rapid changes. She had set down her tea untasted, and leant forward, full of confused longing and sympathy.

"I do not pretend to understand exactly what you mean, Cecilia," said the girl, looking away into the fire, while she fingered the elaborate trimming on the front of her gown; "though I do not doubt that your intentions are full of kindness. If you have heard any rumours to the effect that I am not happy, they are false. I am not dis-

tressed, I am not at all anxious. Why should I be? My life is generally delightful. Philip is charming to me. We are all a little bored at times, of course; and to be bored is a great evil. But now that Philip has given up hunting I am rarely bored, because I am rarely alone."

"But—but, Jessie," cried Cecilia, speaking urgently—"oh, please don't be angry with me—are you sure you are not deceiving yourself, and overlooking something? It's no business of mine, I know; but you are so young, of course you can't be expected to understand the importance of those little indications. You see, you can't have much experience. Of course I don't blame you for an instant; I only want to save you from regret when it may be too late. You spoke of Colonel Enderby just now. You say he has given up hunting, and people say he is not looking well. Don't you think——"

But there Mrs. Farrell stopped; the blood rushed into her thin cheeks. For the life of her she could get no further.

Jessie's lips parted, but it was hardly in

a smile this time. The two rows of small white teeth were set very firmly together. She drew herself back a little, like some beautiful, lithe, feline thing, crouching ready to spring.

“*Mon Dieu!* Cecilia, you are mysterious,” she said. “Fortunately, my nerves are good, or your conversation might appear absolutely alarming.”

“Oh, Jessie, Jessie!” cried Mrs. Farrell.

She knelt down on the floor before the girl, and put out her hands in an agony of entreaty.

“Don’t be hard with me; don’t turn away, don’t repulse me. I wouldn’t trouble you but that I care so much about your happiness, and—and your husband’s. He is ill. Do listen, dear; try to be brave and face it. I would do anything in the world to help you, only——”

But Jessie interrupted her.

“Go away,” she burst out fiercely, “go away, Cecilia Farrell. What right have you to come here and disturb and frighten me with all sorts of rubbishing rumours and gossip? Get up off the floor. I do not

want you. Why do you come to me, with that horrible, woollen shawl too, and talk to me, and suggest things, and make me uneasy, and cause me to be violent—which I hate being—and rude and uncourteous, as I am now? I will not know, or hear, or see. I will not know, I tell you. It is all an invention, a wretched lie, to poison my happiness. You are cruel; you are envious. Get away from me.”

Meantime, a passage of arms of a very different character had been taking place between Mrs. Jack Enderby and Edmund Drake in the front hall.

“You can’t let her walk back to Tullingworth, you know, in this weather,” Augusta had said, laughing. “If there’s a grain of proper feeling left in you, you’ll drive her home in that celebrated dogcart.”

“Proper! proper’s just the wrong word,” replied Mr. Drake, fidgiting about prodigiously. “Why, God bless me! think of the talk—dogcart, dusk, unknown lady, and your humble servant. Impossible, you know; there’s an end of my reputation.”

“I didn’t know you had any left by this

time. If you have, of course, that makes a difference."

"Didn't know I'd any left, eh?" Mr. Drake rubbed his hands; he was immensely delighted. "Heard anything particular about me, then, just lately?"

"Oh, something abominable—scandalous. Really, you know, I hardly like to repeat it."

Mrs. Jack tugged at the back seams of her ulster to get it into place, and laughed again good-humouredly.

"Save poor Cecilia Farrell the walk back to Tullingworth, and I'll get over my modesty and tell you."

The Colonel stood at the hall door, looking out into the drizzling murky evening. The lamps of Mrs. Jack Enderby's carriage showed with a blurred, red glare through heavy air, as the coachman walked the horses slowly up and down the carriage sweep. The moisture dripped with a dull sound from the near trees and over-hanging woodwork of the gables.

Philip was sad and very tired—worn with strain of suffering and of constant watchful-

ness; worn with that weary daily struggle to look just as usual, be cheerful, and keep up appearances; worn with fear of his wife's detection; worn with yearning that she might come to him and lay her fair head on his breast, and tell him that she knew all, and still loved him—that, ill or well, it should make no difference. Looking out into the mist and darkness, the strain seemed a little more than he could bear. The thought crossed his mind—how long would it all go on? Should he be able to stand it? But he drove the thought away from him strongly, imperatively, with a movement of pride and self-contempt. The night, it seemed, gave evil counsel. He turned back into the hall again, where Augusta and Drake were still chaffing each other.

“You gave thirty pounds to that tiresome Slowby hospital, over and above your subscription, when their funds were low at Michaelmas,” said the lady. “Isn't that enough to make half the county cut you? Think how mean you've made all the rest of us look! Abominable!”

“Oh! confound it, Mrs. Enderby!” cried

the worthy little man, with an air of deep disgust, "that's all, is it? Oh! Now, I tell you what; I'll make a bargain with you. I'll drive Mrs. Farrell home to-night if you'll ask her to your ball in January. It would be a first-rate thing to do. Looks as if she wanted a shaking up, poor thing, somehow."

"Very well, anything you like. I really must go. She'll refuse, though, so I shall have much the best of the bargain. There, stop the carriage, please, Philip; I'm awfully late. And bring Jessie over as soon as you can; we're always delighted to see her. I believe she grows prettier every day. Good-bye, Mr. Drake. Mind you don't back out of your engagement. Yes, all right; I am well tucked up, thanks."

"Now, Enderby," cried Mr. Drake, fussing back into the hall again, when Mrs. Jack was fairly off, "I'm regularly in for it, you see. I've got to make proposals to the widow. Do you think she'd be willing to move soon? I've got a man coming to dinner, so I must trot. Could you go and sound her, do you think?"

When Colonel Enderby went back into

the drawing-room, he perceived immediately that something had gone wrong. Jessie came swiftly up to him, and took hold of his arm.

“Did you send her?” she demanded, pointing to Mrs. Farrell, who stood, a limp dejected figure, on the other side of the room. “Did you know she was coming here to terrify me?”

“Jessie, dear child, be quiet,” he answered, in a low voice. “I’ve sent nobody to you. I don’t even know what you are talking about.”

The tone of Philip’s voice and his look, as he bent down over the girl and spoke to her, were just the last straw to Cecilia Farrell. She had done no good; it was all a miserable failure. The very completeness of her defeat, the utter impossibility of explaining and putting herself in the right, gave her the dignity of desperation. She could not trust herself to look again at Philip Enderby, as she moved across towards the door.

“I will go,” she said quietly; “I am very much pained at what has occurred. I——”

But the Colonel interrupted her ; he was thankful to have something to speak about.

“ My friend Drake is just going to drive back to Tullingworth,” he said civilly to Mrs. Farrell, and keeping his hand steadily on his wife’s shoulder, meanwhile. “ He deputed me to ask if you would do him the honour of driving back with him. It’s a wretched night, and will be very dark soon. I don’t think you ought to walk.”

Cecilia hesitated. She was very unhappy ; she would have been glad to be alone ; but she did not want to appear unreasonable, or in any way offended.

“ It is very kind of Mr. Drake,” she replied ; and her voice was a little shaky.

“ Don’t ask me any questions, Philip,” said Jessie, when she found herself alone with her husband, some few minutes later. “ I don’t want to talk about it. It is not true. Let us forget all about it.”

She came and nestled up against him, and drew his arm round her waist.

“ Do you love me as much as ever, Philip ? ” she asked.

Colonel Enderby paused for a just

appreciable space of time before answering. Then he bowed his head solemnly, as a man who worships.

“Yes, my wife,” he said, “I love you just as well as ever.”

Jessie was silent for a minute or two. As she moved away she said:—

“I don’t much like Mrs. Waterfield; I shall not ask her here again, I think.”

Philip’s face brightened.

“No, I would just as soon you didn’t,” he returned. “I don’t very much fancy her either, to tell the truth.”

BOOK SIXTH.

THE FULFILMENT OF PROPHECY.

CHAPTER I.

FLESH OR SPIRIT?

THE summer and autumn following her step-daughter's wedding were to Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay a period of deep and searching experience. She had made a return upon herself; and that return was not made without considerable pain and mortification. She examined herself and took heed to her ways. The examination revealed many facts that were far from flattering to her self-love; the heeding of her ways showed those same ways to be very far from paths of pleasantness and peace. Still in face of the over-mastering necessity felt by most persons to stand well with themselves, it was not a little to Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay's credit that she should so honestly acknowledge her own shortcomings. To be ashamed is to be capable of amendment:

and to be capable of amendment is perhaps the highest good to which any one of us can reasonably aspire.

Nevertheless, a sense of shame, though most salutary, no doubt, to the soul, is hardly an agreeable or inspiriting daily companion. Eleanor was troubled in many different directions. She had come to realize, with morbid intensity, her responsibility toward Philip Enderby. She exaggerated her own share in his marriage,—ignoring the fact that he, after all, was quite as ready to make his proposal as she was to have him make it. She looked with feverish anxiety for the English post; and managed to read between the lines, to a rather superfluous extent, whenever she received a letter either from Jessie or the Colonel. The former hardly possessed the pen of a ready writer. Her communications were brief, concise, dealing largely in fact and sparingly in emotion. Jessie wrote gaily enough; but her stepmother required more than mere gaiety. She demanded, as usual, assurances and assertions: they did not seem to her to come. Colonel Enderby,

when he referred to his wife, did so in terms altogether worthy of a true and ardent lover ; yet, somehow, Eleanor was not wholly satisfied. On the other hand, let it be granted that hers was a nature very prone to believe in the purifying efficacy of self-torture.

Mr. Ames wrote too. His letters arrived with a regularity and exactitude too careful quite to please the recipient of them. They were amusing and affectionate letters ; but they were wanting in what may be called the note of intimacy. They were the letters of a man who is sensible of an obligation, and who strives to fulfil it in the very best manner : women have lynx eyes for these subtleties.

Bertie was travelling in the East, in company with two agreeable young French gentlemen of his acquaintance. They were making researches. He wrote quite learnedly, yet not without refreshing touches of his habitual cynicism—of ruined temples, stupendous tombs, of deserts, and camels, and Arab sheiks, and the last iniquity of his dragoman. His route was

uncertain, he said; it was difficult to say exactly when or where letters would find him. Sometimes his cousin tore up these sparkling epistles in a passion of impatience; sometimes she came very near shedding tears over them. Poor creature! one way and another she was certainly a good deal tried just now. Her life seemed to her wretchedly purposeless, barren, and sterile.

Miss Keat had returned. But both that lady's gentle tentative watchfulness and Parker's grim tenderness harassed Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay sadly. A household composed exclusively of women is always liable to take a turn in the eccentric and hysterical direction. Notwithstanding their true regard for one another, all three women grew—it must be owned—uncommonly touchy; each one of the trio being prepared to affirm that she alone was keeping her head, while the others were exhibiting unmistakable signs of incipient insanity.

About the end of August, Miss Keat, however, came involuntarily but effectively to the rescue. Eleanor had stoutly refused to go away. At moments she hated the

red villa ; yet she had a morbid dread of leaving it and venturing into the outer world again. The summer was hot ; the dust and glare from the highroad and the sea almost blinding. As one cloudless day followed another, poor little Miss Keat began to give out. She missed Jessie's joyous presence ; she missed the gentle excitement, necessarily produced in an innocent and virginal heart, by the daily sight of a good-looking young man with that most attractive of all attributes—a history. Miss Keat began to melt both mentally and physically. Her round, little figure fell away till the fronts of her mild grey cotton and alpaca dresses became quite loose and baggy ; her pale blue eyes grew daily more vague and watery. Between heat, and worry, and depression she was on the verge of a serious breakdown. Suddenly Eleanor discovered all this ; called herself a monster of selfishness and ingratitude : and before her companion had time to draw a breath or utter a feeble protest against giving everybody so much trouble, the Villa Mortelli

was left, with locked doors and closed shutters, in the care of the peasant overseer, and she herself was being petted back into good spirits and plumpness among the cool breezes and deep green valleys of Savoy.

Winter saw the household re-established in its old quarters. And to her old troubles—which, by the way, assailed her pretty shrewdly when she resumed her solitary mode of existence—Eleanor had contrived to add a new one, or, to speak more accurately, to revive a past one, which, first the society of her republican friends, and then Mr. Ames' advent, had put to flight some years previously. She plunged into religious polemics; once more she became anxious about the welfare of her soul.

But this time—thanks to the conversations of a cultivated and agreeable Catholic priest, whom she happened to meet during her sojourn in the mountains—her aspirations no longer turned in the direction of ultra-Protestantism; but in that of the Roman Communion. The gentleman in question—himself an Oratorian—talked to

Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay with admirable tact, charming adaptability, and with that underlying suggestion of immutable personal conviction which is so captivating to an enthusiastic woman. Catholicism is not seen in a very refined or spiritual form in Italy. England, unquestionably, in the present day, has the privilege of producing the most exquisite flower of that profoundly agitating and alluring system.

Eleanor was unhappy; she was in need of advice; she yearned—as she had frequently done before—after a distinct vocation. A light seemed to break upon her clouded spirit. She confessed to this stranger things which she would have found it impossible to tell her oldest friend. Perhaps she has never quite forgotten the words which closed her last interview with him, out on the short-cropped turf of the mountain-side, with the solemnity of the everlasting hills brooding above her and the murmur of the streams in her ears.

“The Church,” he said, “has infinite consolations. You have only to claim them. The doors of her holy places stand

ever open ; her hands are ever outstretched, in blessing, to draw souls to her. She alone has dared to fulfil the whole of the divine injunction, adding the wisdom of the serpent to the mildness of the dove. She alone has had the glorious audacity to look at human nature as it really is ; not turning away her eyes from what is vile, and foul, and shameful in it, either in outraged pride or profitless despair. She can dare to probe every wound and search deep into the secret places of man's sin-corrupted heart, because she knows that a miraculous power of healing is with her still, and that she has hope even for the most degraded and fallen.—Some persons venture to smile at the Church as archaic, as the perverse preserver of out-worn superstitions. In truth, she, of all religious systems, is the only living and progressive one. While keeping firm hold on the wisdom and beauty of the Past, she is willing to use the wisdom and beauty of the Present. She treats the diseases of the soul as modern science treats those of the body ; she is always experimenting, acquiring new

facts, recognizing fresh manifestations of eternal law.—Come to her, and she will give you Rest—the only rest possible amid the intricate desires, the anarchic and conflicting passions of modern life. She offers you the serene repose of faith and of obedience; she saves you from yourself; she gives you a rule of life consecrated by the acceptance of saints and martyrs; she gives you a Law as well as a Gospel. Believe me, there can be no peace, here or hereafter, for those who will not accept the first as well as the last of those two things.”

It followed that Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay went back to the little red villa with the inspiring sense of a great possibility hanging over her. She was deeply stirred. How much the charm of her new teacher's voice and manner,—his delightful withdrawal from the world, and lively knowledge of it—went for in her growing convictions, I cannot pretend to pronounce. Bearing in mind the tendencies of the lady's nature, and the present unsatisfied state of her affections, I cannot but imagine that they certainly went for a good deal.

Here I feel that some idealist—always supposing that an idealist should condescend to peruse these humble pages—may cry out rather angrily,—is there no influence, then, which one human being exercises over another, that is wholly pure, unalloyed by any question of sex, above all reproach of the material sensuous element? That question is a painful and risky one to answer. Yet I am afraid the present writer must honestly confess that for his part he has never yet had the happiness of witnessing the operation of such an influence. He hastens to add—in self-defence—that if at any future time he should do so, it will give him the very highest satisfaction to chronicle it.

Eleanor anyhow, took her spiritual perturbations quite seriously. She spent the early winter months tossed on a sea of doubt and indecision. It was not wholly disagreeable to her, perhaps; for this condition of mental agitation made her extremely interesting to herself: and as long as one is interesting to one's self life cannot be said to be unendurable.

The real victim of the situation was Miss Keat. She was constantly required to read aloud lives of the saints, histories of the Church, and treatises sundry and manifold of a ferociously dogmatic and doctrinal order. The good little woman, being herself a staunch Anglican of what may be described as the *Monthly Packet* school, was lamentably put about by this outbreak of controversy on the part of her patroness. She had a tenderness for the early British Church *versus* Augustine; and had been wont to speak, with commendable asperity, of the unwarrantable pretensions of the Bishop of Rome. Now all the foundations of her position seemed in danger of being rent asunder. The poor dear British Church daily threatened to assume a wholly vague, mythical character, while Augustine appeared painfully likely to get it all his own way, after all: and Miss Keat caught herself, more than once, in the act of substituting the subversive expression His Holiness for her former contemptuous and comfortably insular appellation.

By the end of December, Eleanor was

in a state of mind in which one shove from a strong hand would have settled the matter for good and all. She was constant in her attendance at the large, gaudily decorated church down at Terzia; she read and meditated regularly; she talked and thought of little besides this one subject—and undeniably it is a subject on which there is a vast amount to be thought and said.

Miss Keat mourned alone up in her large, bare bed-chamber over the endangered existence of moderate Anglicanism and the Church of her fathers. Parker grew daily more grey and angular. Personally she failed to see what anybody was likely to gain by an exchange of religious systems.

“It’s all very well to call yourself something different,” she said; “but, there, don’t tell me—you ain’t a bit different really. It’s just the same as a woman changing her name in marriage—she fancies she’s going to slip out of all her old plagues; but she finds out she is the same woman, after all, though I’ll be bound she wishes she wasn’t, often enough. Now, I never held very much with Mr. Ames,” she

added, "but I can't say but what I should be glad to see him if he came back just now."

Miss Keat, to whom the above observations were addressed, gave no direct answer. Her moist, blue eyes were firmly fixed upon a large grease spot which sadly disfigured the front of her grey alpaca.

Parker sniffed. There was a fluidity, so to speak, about Miss Keat which made her appear a very feeble and trivial affair at times to the strong-minded waiting-woman.

By the beginning of the new year Eleanor believed she had arrived at an irrevocable decision. She wrote a long and expansive letter to her acquaintance of the summer, whose arguments and sympathy had so deeply affected her. Nor did Eleanor contemplate taking half measures. The magical attraction of the strictly religious life dazzled her imagination. She longed, by one definite act, to cut short both her difficulties of faith and of the affections. She rehearsed to herself her parting letters to Bertie Ames and to the Enderbys. To Bertie it would be a tremendous slap in the face,

which she took a bitter pride in the thought of administering. Colonel Enderby, she felt, would probably remonstrate, and be extremely angry. Englishmen of his type were usually woefully prejudiced in such matters. But she believed, with all the turbulent ardour of her generous nature, that at length she had found rest unto her soul. She smiled at opposition, and was disposed to wave the martyr's palm—before she had gained it too—in a slightly aggressive manner.

She made an official announcement of her plans, one particularly cold and dreary morning, to Parker. Eleanor scorned evasion. She informed her faithful servant that she had arranged to go shortly to England; and put herself in direct communication with the Superior of a Religious House there, with a view to becoming eventually a member of the community.

“I’ve been expecting something of this sort for a long time,” Parker replied, with rather irritating stoicism. “Of course you can do as you like, ma’am; there’s nobody I know of to prevent you.”

She then returned quietly to the examination of the pile of clean house-linen she carried over her arm.

“I was going to ask you to get some new sets of chamber towels,” she added; “these are wearing very thin in places. But, of course, if you’re going out of house-keeping they won’t be wanted.”

This innocent remark had somewhat the effect of a sudden dash of cold water in Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay’s face.

“You don’t take it seriously, Parker,” she cried. “You don’t really believe in it.”

“Well, there’s some things you do believe in more after they’ve happened.”

Parker gave the linen a shake to make it lie flat on her arm. Eleanor felt extremely angry. She gathered the rich, heavy, fur-trimmed cloak she was wearing—the passages and stair-ways of the little, red villa were dreadfully cold—close about her handsome bust and shoulders, and swept stormily away downstairs.

In consequence, perhaps, of the unedifying episode above recounted, Miss Keat was kept particularly hard at work on the

lives of the saints and church history during the following afternoon. It was an odious day. One of those days, in fact, in which beautiful, smiling Italy gives way to the vilest temper, and becomes a perfect virago. The harsh wind rushed round the corners of the house, rattling the wooden shutters backwards and forwards between the plastered wall and their iron fastenings, and whistling in every crevice of the ill-fitting woodwork. Sharp showers of snow and sleet fell at intervals, blotting out the town below, and the long line of surge on the beach; and leaving, when they had passed, a starved and dreary world shuddering beneath a hard grey sky.

Eleanor, with her books and papers, her companion, and her smouldering fire of resentment against Parker—who had refused to “take her seriously”—was sitting in the small drawing-room in which she had had her memorable conversation with Colonel Enderby the day after his arrival in the spring. The aspect of the room was depressing. The spindle-legged white-and-gold chairs, the high bare walls, the pale

frescoed ceiling, and the sun-blached window curtains—swaying in the draughts that made their way in freely at the hinges and catches of the large casements—produced a sufficiently cheerless and even poverty-stricken interior. Those miserable, little Italian billets of wood, pile them together as you may upon the hearth, seem powerless to dispel the deathly chill that lingers about these vaulted chambers and marble floors from November till April.

Eleanor drew her soft fur cloak closer about her and shivered. She was bound to disregard temporal comforts, to cultivate a severe ascetic habit of mind; meanwhile she disliked this bleak weather quite tremendously, and had a frivolous disposition to grumble aloud over the draughts and the moaning wind.

“*Ce Séquanus, dont nous racontions plus haut le tranquille courage,*” read Miss Keat, carefully minding both her pronunciation and her commas, “*et la fervente piété, avait été prévenu——*”

“Forgive my interrupting you,” said Eleanor; “but don’t you think if the screen

was pulled a little more this way—no, like that I mean, to the right—we should be warmer? There is a simply polar blast coming in at that window. Yes, thanks; that really is better. And Séquanus, don't trouble to go back, pray. I remember about his piety and courage."

Miss Keat sat down again by the small table loaded with serious-looking volumes. Her gentle and modest spirit, and her dependent position, made these same saintly lives very attractive to her. The calm, delicate, yet austere pages of Montalembert were more sympathetic to Miss Keat than she was quite willing to allow.

"Oh yes," she went on: "*avait été prévenu que les abords de l'impénétrable forêt où il allait s'aventurer étaient occupés par des bandes d'assassins——*"

"Surely there is some one at the front door!" exclaimed Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay.

Notwithstanding her magnificent projects and finely religious moods and fancies, this lady was at bottom, like all true women, essentially concrete and personal. The early saint, with his courage and bands

of assassins was undoubtedly deeply important. She had a perfectly sincere belief that his life had a subtle and profound, if slightly obscure, bearing upon her own spiritual needs and history. And yet, alas for human weakness! somebody at the front door was certainly more immediately interesting. She had the grace, however, to make an attempt at concealing an open acknowledgment of this pitiful fact both from herself and Miss Keat, and added—

“Surely no one in their senses would dream of coming here to-day! It really would be most annoying. When we are settled down at work like this, I hate being interrupted.”

“——*des bandes d'assassins, que l'on qualifiait même d'anthropophages. 'N'importe,' avait il répondu à celui de ces proches qui——*”

“There is some one coming upstairs,” said Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay.

She let the needle-work she held in her hands slip on to the ground at her side. Her mouth was slightly open; she sat bolt upright, listening intently.

"It is probably Marie going to fasten the drawing-room shutters," Miss Keat observed, in a tone of mild reproach. Then she went on reading again: "*celui de ces proches qui se croyait le propriétaire de cette région, et qui lui donnait ces renseignements, 'montre-moi seulement le chemin pour y arriver——'*"

"Miss Keat, you must stop; pray stop!" cried Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay.

She had turned very pale. She stood up. Her handsome dark eyes had a wild, eager light in them, and the fur-lined cloak she still wore fell back from her shoulders in a royal sort of fashion.

Good little Miss Keat looked up in innocent bewilderment, troubled with uncomfortable visions of the possible arrival in bodily form of the afore-mentioned anthropophagi on the landing without.

As the door opened, Eleanor gave a low, exulting laugh.

"Yes, I knew it—I knew it," she said under her breath. Then her expression grew tense and defiant again.

Whatever strictures we may be tempted

to make upon his conduct in some matters, it is quite undeniable that Mr. Bertie Ames possessed a fund of the most admirable composure. He dawdled into the small drawing-room of the Villa Mortelli, after some nine months' absence in far distant lands, on that bitter blowing January day, with the air of a man who has, at most, been away for half an hour.

"Ah!" he murmured, in his rich sweet tones; "you really contrive to be moderately warm in here. What a mercy! The weather outside is a scandal. It is an absolute outrage."

"You have come back," said Eleanor, hoarsely.

She did not offer to go forward and greet him, but stood quite still in the same rigid attitude.

"Yes, I believe so," he replied, smiling at her mildly. "Surely it is a very reasonable thing to do? It is quite a long time, when one comes to think of it, since I have had the pleasure of seeing you, dear cousin Nell, and Miss Keat."

Bertie Ames bowed pleasantly to the

latter lady as he finished his speech. Miss Keat bridled perceptibly.

“ Oh, Mr. Ames ! ” she said.

“ I was going to ask you to indulge me,” he continued, “ to do me a favour, a quite prodigious favour, Miss Keat. I am here—like this—in the clothes I stand up in. Would you see Antonio for me, and arrange about his going down as soon as possible, and getting my luggage, which is cooling itself at Terzia railway station? It would be a real act of charity on your part, Miss Keat—a laying up of imperishable treasure against the future.”

“ Oh, Mr. Ames ! ” said that lady again, slightly shocked.

Eleanor sat down again in the corner of the sofa, within the screen. Great gusts of wind rushed round the house, and banged and rattled the shutters, while the sleet hissed against the glass of the windows. But the storm which raged in the beautiful woman's spirit was of even fiercer quality. She adored this man ; and yet she almost loathed him, as he stood quietly warming his hands at the fire.

He was so infuriatingly calm and suave, so delicately indifferent in manner. Already she was sensible of the tremendous power he exercised over her.

There were a few minutes of silence after Miss Keat left the room, then Eleanor spoke.

"Why have you come back, Bertie?" she demanded.

"I am afraid I startled you, Eleanor," he said, looking round at her, and still stretching his brown, well-shaped hands towards the fire. "It was stupid of me—but—well—I was, honestly, in a hurry—in a hurry to see you."

"Charming!" she replied, with an effort. "The statement actually seems to have a faint aroma of compliment about it."

Bertie Ames came across from the fireplace and sat down at the other end of the wide sofa. Eleanor pushed her full skirts aside instinctively. She was on the defensive. She wanted to maintain the farthest possible limit of distance between herself and her companion.

"Dear cousin Nell," he said, looking at

her with a certain steadiness of gaze, "do not try to be unfriendly or ungracious. Let us be natural. I have come here neither out of impertinence nor frivolity—just to pass the time. I want to consult you. Really, for once in my life, I have got something which appears to me important to say."

Bertie paused. Notwithstanding the directness of his gaze, there was a trace of hesitancy in his manner; but Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay made no effort to help him out. All her energies were concentrated upon the one desire to withstand his influence.

"Eleanor," he went on, "have you heard anything particular about the Enderbys lately?"

Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay tossed back her head impatiently.

"Happy are the people who have no history!" she said, almost contemptuously. "There is nothing particular to hear; it is the old story. Jessie amuses herself, and Colonel Enderby adores her."

"That is nothing new, certainly," he

answered. "But does she adore Colonel Enderby in return?"

"Do you wish her to?" inquired Eleanor. "I congratulate you. Decidedly your recent travels have had a highly beneficial effect upon your mind."

Mr. Ames smiled blandly.

"All things are possible, Nell. And though change of scene is so universally advocated for the cure of mental depression that one naturally has but small faith in it, it may really be efficacious now and again. —But, seriously, to return to the matter in hand. I received a most singular letter from Cecilia Farrell the other day, forwarded by my banker in Milan. Cecilia's epistolatory style is slightly confusing; it is vague in matters of punctuation, it wants lucidity, it does not exactly possess what one would call literary merit. Still, I made out something from it; quite enough to be disturbing. She hints at dark mysteries and dire secrets regarding the Colonel. Don't be alarmed; not moral lapses of any kind. He remains the original good boy, I assure you. But I really am afraid his

goodness is a trifle excessive, just now, and treads hard on the heels of folly. As far as I can discover, the position is really an uncomfortable one. He is dangerously ill, and won't tell Jessie or take any care of himself for fear——”

Bertie looked away, and raised his eyebrows.

“Well, we both know Jessie,” he added quietly. “Jessie is a great many delightful things; but she is not exactly the woman one would choose to be nursed by.”

Eleanor listened with deepening interest. She began to forget herself, while all her old vague fears arose again for Philip Enderby. She threw the fur cloak back off her shoulders, and looked her companion frankly and earnestly in the face, as she said—

“Colonel Enderby did me a great kindness. He has behaved very nobly by me. If this is true, I must interfere. I must try to help him; I must do something.”

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

“Ah! but there is just the difficulty. Colonel Enderby is as proud as Lucifer;

your good people are always the impossible ones to manage. Cecilia only knows all this through an indiscretion on the part of his doctor. The doctor and Cecilia, it may be noted in passing, seem on wonderfully friendly terms.—We all know, let alone Cecilia's personal charms, how irresistibly impelled any man would be to covet my aunt Mrs. Murray in the capacity of a mother-in-law. Well, Cecilia seems to have done her best to intervene for the Colonel's sake—poor dear Cecilia! But her intervention was a little—— How can I put it gracefully? It proved abortive, any way. Now she writes to me; she says I have influence with Jessie, she implores me to use it. It struck me as a little awkward, Cousin Nell, and I came here to consult you."

Eleanor sat upright and silent. The finer and the baser instincts of her nature wrestled together, turbulently.

"We must think it over carefully," said Mr. Ames.

"Yes," she responded coldly, "we must think it over."

Bertie Ames rose, walked away to Miss

Keat's little table, and turned over the books that lay on it, reading their titles in a pointless sort of way. For once he seemed embarrassed and not quite certain how best to conduct himself.

"Is that ugly little abomination Malvolio all right?" he asked presently.

"I believe so," answered Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay.

Since Jessie's wedding day the monkey had been anything but a favourite with her; and she had banished him sternly to the lower regions of the red villa.

"You propose remaining here to-night, I suppose?" she added, after a pause.

The situation was not an easy one to sustain. It weighed heavily upon her. She felt she could hardly stay in the room with her cousin without the conversation going farther; and it could hardly fail, in going farther, to become dangerous. She gathered up her work, that had lain neglected on the floor for the last quarter of an hour, got up, and prepared to leave the room.

"I must go and speak to Parker about preparing your room," she said.

Bertie Ames dropped the heavy book he was examining on to the table ; it slipped and fell to the ground with a bang. He did not stop to pick it up ; but came quickly across to her.

“ Wait one minute, please, Eleanor,” he said. “ I have only half done my story.”

Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay sank back on to the sofa again, and looked up at the young man, with his handsome face and neat pointed beard, as he stood before her. Exactly what it was in his appearance that revealed the fact to her she would have been quite unable to say, but Eleanor had a rapid perception that some extraordinary change had come over him.

“ What is it, Bertie ? ” she cried, in sudden agitation ; “ what is it ? For God’s sake, tell me.”

“ The Countess Tolomei is dead,” he answered.

Then Bertie Ames’ long-sustained composure gave way utterly and entirely. The wild, hot-blooded, southern nature burst out and overflowed in him. He flung himself down on the sofa.

"I am free," he cried, "I am free. The chain is broken at last. I belong to myself. I am my own master. It has been damnable! Like a madman I loved her years ago; like a madman, nay, like a very devil, I have rebelled and hated, and cried out and agonized after freedom. And now it is all over. The past is wiped out. It has come, this thing I so wildly implored to have, and—silly fool that I am—I shrink before it. It is so new and strange. I am fairly frightened."

He covered his face with his hands, threw himself forward till his head rested right down on his cousin's knees, and broke into an absolute passion of weeping.

As to Eleanor, she was shaken to the very foundations of her being. There was a fascination, a delight, in the position that was terrible, blinding. Her whole heart melted in fierce joy. Yet she struggled generously not to give way, not to take advantage of the man's overmastering emotion, though each of his sobs as he lay there sent a thrill of delicious anguish right through her. Eleanor sat up tall and

still, with the folds of her thick cloak falling about her. She laid one fine white hand on the varnished, gilded woodwork of the back of the sofa; and let the other hang down idly at her side. With not so much as a finger would she touch him. She would be quite quiet and passive. Come what might, Bertie should never have to regret that he had so lost himself, and so trusted her.

But a woman is too heavily handicapped. The body gives way, even while the will is yet steady and active. The young man's passion did not soon wear itself out, and the strain of it was too great for Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay. Her sight became blurred and dim, a sickening languor crept over her; and when Bertie, recovering himself at last, looked up with a keen sense of shame and self-recollection, she lay back, pale and lifeless, against the great, faded sofa-cushions, in a dead faint.

Mr. Ames was a first-rate nurse, as has already been mentioned. He chafed his cousin's hands, found her salts and eau-de-Cologne—and, all the while, he was in a

turmoil of thought, of doubt and perception, and of fateful decision. This woman loved him. In person she was very attractive; he was sincerely attached to her. There was nothing very fresh about it all, perhaps; but, then, we can't have everything, and Bertie Ames at four and thirty was a bit of a philosopher. It is not a thing to be lightly treated after all, the passionate love of a beautiful and noble-hearted woman, who knows the worst as well as the best of you. Eleanor was past her first youth; but, then, so was Bertie himself, for that matter. He was undeniably conscious of a sharp pang when he thought of Jessie. Oh that this had only occurred a year sooner! Yet Bertie—looking down at the white face of the woman before him, as she slowly opened her luminous eyes, and came back once more to the normal and familiar out of that strange interval of unconsciousness—had the grace to know that, in receiving the acknowledgment of her affection, he was receiving very much more than, in strict justice, was by any means his due.

“Cousin Nell,” he said, sitting down by her again, and taking her hand, “is it possible that you care for me a little?”

Eleanor was very weak; she recognized, too, the absolute futility of any further attempt at concealment. The expression of her delicately shaped mouth was sad, but it was wholly sweet as she answered him.

“That question has been a long time in coming, Bertie?”

“Yes, Nell,” he said. “But you were always very generous.”

“To my shame, I have answered the question before you asked it.”

Bertie Ames raised her hand and kissed it, looking at her very fixedly as he did so.

At the touch of his lips the colour rushed back into Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay’s face.

“Ah! stop, stop,” she cried, with a sudden desperate energy; “stop before it is too late. You will regret this; you will wish it undone. Cancel it now at once. Tell me you don’t mean it; that it is all a crazy dream and delusion. You have been forced into it hurriedly, without due consi-

deration, through my folly. Take it back while you can. I will forgive you; I will drive it out of my mind. I will never, never refer to it or reproach you. But if you go further, Bertie—oh, I am so weak!—I shall not be able to bear it; it will break my heart.”

For all answer Bertie Ames bent forward and kissed her on the lips.

“It was fore-ordained, Eleanor; it is done and settled. Pray don’t say so many charming things to me; you will make me intolerably conceited. And it would be an obvious mistake on your part to increase the number of my offensive peculiarities, just as you have made up your mind to pass the remainder of your natural life in my company.”

Later that same evening, when she had read Cecilia Farrell’s letter, Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay turned in thought very warmly towards the Colonel. Did she not, after all, practically owe him everything? She had got what she had longed so ardently for at last; and the satisfaction of her longing, far from making her selfish, exalted

her moral nature for the time, and produced in her a craving after conduct that seemed to her heroic and splendid.

“You must go to England, Bertie,” she said. “Yes, I will dare to trust you. Indeed, I should feel safer if you see Jessie again.”

Eleanor lifted her head proudly; she looked really superb as she spoke. Ah! what a medicine is happiness! The physician giving his patients a prescription which induced it, need not fear but that his name, through all future ages, would rival *Æsculapius*’ own.

“I do not say that I shall not suffer horribly at moments, but I will offer up my suffering as an expiation. With his will or against it, you must save Colonel Enderby.”

This was all very well. Bertie smiled and raised his eyebrows. His cousin’s enthusiastic treatment of the subject appeared to him both pretty and amusing.

“I have the highest regard for Enderby,” he said; “but does it not strike you, Nell, that there may be a slight inconvenience?”

We were not united during his stay here in exactly the closer bonds of affection."

"Never mind," she answered. "Cecilia is right; your words have greater weight with Jessie than any one else's. She will attend to what you say. You must go soon; you must manage it. Surely," added Eleanor, very sweetly and gently, "if I am willing you should go—I realize the risk—you can hardly refuse?"

Parker made her own comment on Mr. Ames' return. Whether she apprehended all the consequences likely to result from that event, I cannot say; but she selected a characteristic manner of expressing her general sense of approval.

"I think you might as well get those new sets of towels, after all, ma'am," she said, as she brushed out her mistress's masses of fine, dusky hair that night.

Eleanor turned round upon her with glowing cheeks and flashing eyes.

"Parker, you are impertinent," she cried. "Why may I as well get them?"

"Oh, you know your own mind best, of course, ma'am," returned the other woman

calmly. "You make me pull out your hair dreadfully, when you twist about like that. You never could sit quiet and sensible to have your hair brushed ever since you were a child. Only these towels, as I told you, are wearing as thin as thin—they don't pay for my time mending; and I thought we mightn't be going out of housekeeping quite so soon, after all."

Parker ended up with a very audible sniff.

And the polemics, and the lives of the saints, and the blessed repose of a religious house, and the infinite consolations of the holy Oratorian? Ah! well, sweet reader, we must not ask too much from poor human nature. Mr. Bertie Ames had come back, you see, and that had made a difference in the relative value of these things.

CHAPTER II.

DR. SYMES COMES NEAR CAPPING A FIRST
MISTAKE BY A SECOND.

MRS. JACK ENDERBY'S ball was a great success. Everybody said so, and in the verdict of the multitude is truth—at least, so democracy, the gospel of the present era, assures us. The whole entertainment went off admirably; it had all been done generously and in the very best style. One disturbing episode did indeed occur in the course of the evening, which to a moralist of a morbid and gloomy temper might have served as a text for a depressing discourse. One member of the assembled company did, unquestionably, have his measure of enjoyment lopped off painfully short. But there—let us by all means avoid the soft swampy places of over-tender sentiment;

and, taking our stand on the solid ground of common-sense, proclaim aloud the consolatory doctrine of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This over-careful consideration of the fate of a unit, here and there, betokens a lamentable smallness of vision. We will base ourselves broadly; stand with our legs very wide apart; and so keep our balance, spite of certain qualms and queasiness. Shall the instruments of the musicians be silenced, and the quick feet of the dancers be stayed; shall the cold baked meats be left untasted, and the wine undrunk, because one individual has had the ill-luck to fall a victim to some of those manifold evils that lie ever in wait for the unhappy sons and daughters of men?

No, indeed, says the wise world; such things are altogether too common to affect us. Are they not happening somewhere all day long? Rather, then, let the pulse of the valse beat faster and more urgently; and the lithe young figures drift more rapidly across the gleaming floor, while the hot air of the ball-room palpitates with light and emotion. Dance on, cries the

wise world: let the beautiful madness have its fullest sway. Its time is short, at best. The feverish hours are passing, hastening, fleeting onward towards the chill solemnity of the winter dawn; even as the fantastic, passionate, irresolute lives of the dancers are fleeting onward towards the pale silence and immutable calm of death. Therefore, dance on, cries the world—dance till you forget those that suffer and that are stricken; forget the anguish, and the groaning, and the sweat of blood.

Persons of good taste and breeding will always help you to do this, for they are first-rate professors in the fine art of living. The rack, and the whip, and the thumb-screw, and those other ugly inventions of the enemy that men have named accident, disease, decay, insanity, are to be found under all roofs alike, it is true; but well-bred persons have at least the grace to hide them away in some far-removed and thick-walled chamber, and to double-lock the door of it. Dance on, then, fearlessly; in good society you are not likely to be offended by hearing the hiss of the lash, or the squeal

of the pulleys, or the desolate moan of the victim. And even if, by chance, these unpleasant little matters should not be quite well managed, and a strange discordant echo should rise, now and again, above the swift rush of the melody, and the soft rhythmical sweep of women's draperies—dance on still. To the worldly wise, who have truly learnt their lesson, the neighbourhood of possible pain only lends a keener edge to the appetite for present pleasure. Dance, dance while you can. The time is short, and who knows but his own turn may come next? Dance on; only remember when your turn does come—as come it most surely will—that you owe a certain debt to the society which has played with you, laughed with you, flattered you, loved you, too, after its fashion, through all the days of your vanity. Rally what remnants of manhood may be left in you; put a good face on the matter; give as little trouble as possible; go away decently and good-temperedly into that thick-walled chamber with the torturers, for escape is hopeless; and so, indeed, silence is best.

Despite all this sermonizing, the fact remains that Mrs. Jack Enderby's ball was a great success. Everybody came, from Lord Sokeington with his omnibus and carriagefuls driving over the ten miles from Pentstock Castle, to Mrs. Mumford, the parson's wife at Priors Basset—a Madonna-like lady of an innocently surprised, sour-sweet countenance, who for years has greeted all local festivities in the same puce-coloured silk with satin trimmings, and white lace shawl, sometime her wedding-veil.

Cecilia Farrell, too, was at the Bassett Darcy ball. She would very willingly have stayed away, it is true; but Mrs. Murray would not hear of it. Cecilia must go. Mrs. Murray managed to tuck her into the vacant place in a fly hired by her neighbour Mrs. Latimer for this auspicious occasion. Yet further, Cecilia must be resplendent. Mrs. Murray was playing that same old game of hers: and this time she believed she had sighted so valuable a possible son-in-law that the expenditure of a handsome number of pounds on a suitable

costume for Cecilia was a mere triviality. Mrs. Farrell herself, in her fine gown, was far from happy. She felt a good deal like the proverbial dog at a fair. What had she to do with all this light and warmth and merriment ; with these wide, bright, crowded rooms, and their shifting show of wealth and beauty ?

Mrs. Jack Enderby welcomed her genially enough ; but there had been a lurking criticism and kindly amusement in her bold, comely face as she did so. Augusta, like most women of a robust physique and healthy habit of mind, entertained a kind of secret contempt for the less successful members of her own sex. This, too, was the hour of Augusta's triumph. She gloried in sight of her great stately house full of guests. Her heart swelled with pride as she stood there to greet one well-known face after another—knowing that half the county, and half the county's menservants as well, were eating and drinking and diverting themselves freely at her expense. This prodigal, open-handed instinct of hospitality is rather a savage virtue, perhaps ; but I

venture to think it a very real one, all the same.

And Mrs. Jack's exultation on the present occasion was the more excusable, in that she had served her apprenticeship to narrow means and hard work pretty thoroughly during those years spent in the ramshackle old rectory at Cold Enderby; when the monthly nurse was a periodic visitor; when the children grew so fast out of the best frocks that it was so difficult to replace; when a rise of a penny in the pound in poor's-rate taxed all her philosophy; and when Jack went out farming or shooting every day in the week, to find himself, late on Saturday night, with hardly a word written of to-morrow's sermon. Now Augusta was agreeably sensible of having escaped out of the slavery of Egypt, and taken up her quarters in land flowing with milk and honey. Strong in the enjoyment of her own success, she was a little disposed to look down on women less happily situated than herself. Prosperity too often has a hardening influence even on the really good-hearted.

And so poor Cecilia Farrell, as usual, represented the death's head at the feast—or, to speak accurately, would have represented it, if anybody had been at leisure to observe her. Mr. Drake looked after her, it is true, in his kind fussy way at intervals; but Mr. Drake was in a small turmoil of self-importance. He had constituted himself aide-de-camp to Mrs. Jack Enderby, and rushed about wildly—finding partners for pretty girls, securing seats and suppers for elderly ladies, dancing himself vigorously between whiles, and pervading space generally, till it seemed probable that only a direct interposition of Providence would prevent his falling incontinently into an apoplectic fit.

“With that red face and short neck,” as Mrs. Mumford remarked severely to her excellent spouse, “it is really very dangerous for a middle-aged man to be so active.”

Mrs. Farrell, then, sat against the wall and watched the movement and gaiety; and with all her goodness she could not banish a sense of injury from her mind. It

seemed hard to be no longer young and attractive; to be passed over and generally out of it. Brilliant young people laugh lightly at us old frumps, male and female; but we, the said frumps, unfortunately retain our sensibilities, even when hairs are grey, and complexions dulled, and symmetry of figure is merged in fat or reduced to curious angularity of outline. In our best moments we laugh with them. It is a ridiculous thing to grow old, of course: nevertheless the laughter leaves a sting behind it, which rankles a good deal at times. Decidedly Cecilia did not relish her part of death's head at the feast; and it was with a distinct lightening of the heart that, towards the middle of the evening, she perceived the high conical skull and odd goat-like physiognomy of Dr. Symes, as that gentleman—hugging the wall to avoid collision with the dancers—made his way slowly round to the spot where she was stationed.

“Ah! my dear Mrs. Farrell, at last! I have spent the last half-hour in searching for you. Mrs. Latimer told me, when I

first entered the ball-room, that you had driven over with her and her daughters. I was sincerely glad to learn you were here. 'This species of scene,' continued the doctor, waving his hand with a certain magnificence towards the dancers—"this species of scene should have an intrinsic value even in the eyes of us who are merely spectators. It represents an important, and, I would add, a recurrent necessity of our strangely complex constitution—the necessity for recreation. Personally I am a strong advocate of recreation. I regard it as a bulwark against a thousand insidious moral and physical temptations. I would say to every one,—Cultivate a capacity for innocent amusement; unstring the bow, at times; give the mind and spirit a holiday."

The doctor settled himself comfortably on the lounge beside Cecilia. He was sensible of a condition of serene well-being just at the present time, which disposed him to be communicative. He did not disguise from himself the sources of that sense of well-being. He was perfectly

aware that, analytically examined, it resolved itself into a matter of so much warmth, light, and sympathetic, sensuous excitement, reinforced by an excellent supper and a certain quantity of alcohol. Mortimer Symes was neither of the age nor of the squeamish way of thinking, that is suspicious of all sensations that do not clearly take their rise in the higher faculties of our being. If, in themselves, the sensations were agreeable, he did not think it incumbent upon him to reject them because they did not hail from a finely intellectual region. The excellent man had arrived at a temper wherein he was glad to pick a modest posy of pleasure anywhere by the wayside, having quite ceased to expect that Fortune would ever turn him loose in fairy gardens and bid him fill his hands with priceless exotics. He felt comfortable and communicative. He wanted to moralize at his ease; and Mrs. Farrell, he knew, was a model listener.

“Yes,” he said, leaning back and letting his keen, observant eyes wander slowly over the bright swaying throng:—“I would say

to every one, specially to those who lead solitary lives and are of a serious habit,—Retain as long as possible your capacity for amusement; add constantly to the sum of your lighter experiences. One or two acquaintances of mine have been a little surprised at seeing me present to-night. I appear to them, I imagine, slightly out of place. But I know how much I gain by occasionally attending a reunion of this description—gain, not only in the way of immediate entertainment, but in the enlarging of my comprehension of my fellow-creatures. Solitude deadens the sympathies. I would go even further. The exclusive society of only a few persons, however deeply beloved those persons may be, is calculated sadly to narrow and obscure the outlook on life. The general is tonic; the particular—the particular——”

Mortimer Symes stopped abruptly at the climax of his aphorism; for “the particular” arrested his attention sharply just then, in the shape of a tall, good-looking young fellow, with a fresh beardless face, and a girl in a gleaming, pale yellow dress, that

floated out like a delicate foam-bell from her charming waist as she danced.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, almost involuntarily, "that is a rather dangerously pretty performance."

Cecilia followed the direction of the doctor's gaze. It was the first time she had seen Jessie since her wretched and mortifying visit to the Manor House. That she might learn something about Jessie and her husband, and how they were going on, had in a measure reconciled Cecilia to the distasteful idea of this Bassett ball. She did not want to come personally in contact with either of them; but she longed to know. Now she knew something, any way—namely, that Jessie was going on in a sufficiently gay and indifferent manner.

Mrs. Farrell clasped and unclasped her grey-gloved hands as they rested upon her black-lace lap rather nervously.

"I am afraid I ought to have tried to find an opportunity of telling you sooner, Dr. Symes," she said. "I did no good, only harm, when I went to Mrs. Enderby. You remember about it?"

The doctor turned to her with his blandest smile. To have spoken first on this embarrassing subject would, he felt, have been an indelicate, although he had been curious, for some while, to know the result of Mrs. Farrell's mission.

"I am sure you did your very best, my dear madam," he answered; "and no one can do more than that."

"It was a miserable, miserable failure," she continued, in a tone of distress. "Everything went wrong. I was not fortunate, I suppose, in my way of putting it; and Mrs. Enderby would not listen to me. I hope it isn't wrong, Dr. Symes," she added, in a low voice, "but I am almost afraid of her. She was so strange that afternoon. She doesn't seem to be touched by what would certainly touch anybody else. I don't want to say anything unkind or ill-natured; but she is not, somehow, quite like other people."

"Ah! you feel that too," returned the doctor.

He nodded intelligently—as one who could say a good deal more if he chose to

do so—and then, throwing his head back, sank into a rather easier attitude on the lounge.

“I have made nearer acquaintance with Mrs. Enderby since we last discussed this subject. A singular nature—a curious and interesting study—so highly developed in some directions, and undeveloped in others. Perfectly true, Mrs. Farrell; I have feared lately that I had asked you to perform a very hard task. Undeniably Mrs. Enderby would be remarkably difficult to appeal to under some circumstances.”

Cecilia hesitated; finally she said:—

“Do you mean that she’s deficient in any way?”

“Oh dear, no!” replied Dr. Symes with alacrity; “not in the least deficient in the ordinary acceptation of the term. I should say, on the contrary, that this young lady—though really I must apologize for submitting so charming a person to a cold-blooded, critical analysis—I should say she was a trifle over-vitalized. The body responds almost too quickly to the instincts and emotions; it interprets them with too

great readiness. Second thoughts, you know, are admitted to be best, and this young lady, I fancy, never arrives at second thoughts at all; but speaks and acts entirely from the impulse of the moment—with amazing spontaneity, in fact. And that is perilous,” he added meditatively—“especially for others.”

Cecilia looked up inquiringly. The words, though she did not comprehend them, conveyed a disturbing impression to her mind.

“Our creed, my dear Mrs. Farrell—our creed requires us to believe that every human being is the possessor, for joy or sorrow, of an immortal soul. Otherwise”—Mortimer Symes spoke with a touch of the wholesale manner—“were I free, in short, to follow my own conclusions—I bow to the authority of my creed, of course, and abstain from following them—I should venture most seriously to question the truth of that doctrine.”

The doctor was becoming alarmingly expansive; but the general sense of well-being, already alluded to, unlooses the tongue to a pernicious extent; and fre-

quently tempts a man to give voice to his deepest thought—which had better be hidden—instead of to his superficial and conventional thought, which may be presented to society with perfect safety.

Just at that moment, however, the stream of his eloquence suffered a violent check. A mild, lanky youth—who undoubtedly stood in need of a few lessons from some professor of dancing, judging from his extremely erratic method of progression—suddenly deposited a ponderous lady, in cinnamon and old-gold-coloured garments, plump on the doctor's lap.

“Beg-your-pardon,” ejaculated the youth, all in one word; and, recovering at the same moment both his own footing and his grasp on his partner's waist, plunged away with her again into the crowd.

“Ah, good gracious! how deeply embarrassing!” cried the doctor, rubbing his knees, bruised with the heavy weight so unexpectedly let down upon them.

Then he cleared his throat, and arranged himself a little.

“To resume,” he observed with dignity.

“That the germ of a soul is always present, I will not deny. But in rare and curious cases it seems never to develop out of the embryonic condition. Some persons are essentially too natural and healthy to produce soul. I speak colloquially. To put it in a more accurate form—every nature has only a certain capacity. If the body is highly vitalized, and the intelligence highly vitalized too, there is not force enough left over to promote active development of spirit. We are coming to acknowledge that the moral constitution may be subject to congenital disease and defect, just as the physical constitution has long been admitted to be. Why not carry on the analogy one step farther, and allow that the spiritual constitution may be radically and irretrievably defective likewise? My professional experience, I own, inclines me to hail thankfully any lessening of the load of human responsibility.”

Dr. Symes drew himself up short. He became aware that he had wandered away along paths of metaphysical speculation, to a wild and unfamiliar region, through

which courtesy hardly sanctioned his inviting Mrs. Farrell to follow him, in her best gown and grey kid gloves.

"But really," he said, with his blandest smile, "I trespass on your forbearance most unwarrantably. I advocate recreation, and then proceed to weary you with recondite and, I fear, unorthodox questions. Forgive me, Mrs. Farrell. An indulgent listener too often makes an inconsiderate speaker."

Cecilia, however, was not light in hand. Her apprehension was slow; but it was tenacious. She sat, hearing the gay yet pathetic music, the buzz of conversation and rustle of women's garments, and seeing the involved and quickly changing figures of the dance, in mute astonishment, almost horror. To her conscience, formed in a definitely religious mould, accepting unreservedly the Puritan solution of the enigma of existence, the doctor's ingenious little theories were not unorthodox merely, but injurious, bewildering, terribly subversive.

"Do you mean to say you think the

person we were talking of has no soul?" she inquired, in a scared whisper.

"Oh, you must not take my words too seriously, my dear madam," he answered. "I spoke as one speaks in the borderland between absolute truth and mere fancy. I spoke in what I may designate as a pseudo-scientific spirit. The tongue is an unruly member, you know; and leaves strict veracity too often far behind it. I must try to justify myself. I mean just this."

He sat up.

"Ah! there, observe her now," he cried quickly.

Jessie in her gauzy draperies passed close by them, valseing with Charlie Colvin—she had been valseing with him pretty nearly all the evening, by the way. They both danced well; but their dancing had a peculiar quality about it; it was more than simply graceful and accurate. If I may indulge for a moment in Dr. Symes' rather fanciful way of regarding things, I should describe these two dancers as being animated with a common life. There was a singular concentration—not of purpose, for it was

perfectly spontaneous and instinctive, but —of emotion about Jessie, which expressed itself as much in the action of her supple, rounded figure as in her face. There was a fulness of enjoyment in every easy, gliding motion. She danced not as the ordinary young lady dances in the ordinary ballroom, with a consciousness of chaperones and propriety in the background, with a touch of nervousness about the set of her skirt, and harassing suspicions that she is beginning to look heated. Jessie yielded herself up to her dancing with an extraordinary singleness of purpose. The whole woman danced, careless alike of past and future, with the victorious ease and grace of overflowing health and gaiety—with no desire, no aspiration, beyond the enjoyment of the present moment.

As Mrs. Farrell watched her, in the light of her conversation with the doctor; as she noted the exquisitely, harmonious movements; the clear, unflushed cheek; the even rise and fall of the girl's bosom; the passionless content of her eyes as the turns of the valse brought her face for a few

seconds into view;—as, I say, she marked all this, Mrs. Farrell shrank back into herself, dazzled, amazed, almost terrified at the vista of undreamed-of possibilities that opened before her.

Dr. Symes looked at her closely. He perceived that she saw—dimly and brokenly, perhaps, but still saw—that which he had desired she should see.

“Human nature is very complicated,” he began, a trifle sententiously. “You cannot enclose or account for its infinite intricacies under any single system, Mrs. Farrell. I am no scholar, in the technical sense of the term, I regret to say. I am a mere dabbler in the shallows of that prolific ocean of prehistoric fable, which is at once so hopelessly fantastic and so deeply imbued with some of the most obscure and intimate secrets of existence. But in watching that young lady just now, I could not avoid thinking of the ancient conception of a race of beings supplying the missing link between ourselves and the dumb animals about us. I seemed to be carried back, in imagination, to an old, old

world—older than right and wrong, older than heaven and hell—a calm, simple, sunny, light-hearted world, where nature reigned; and in which man was but the fairest and cleverest of the beasts that perish, triumphant in his strength and beauty, obeying fearlessly the dictates of his nature, untrammelled by conscience, unburdened by the suspense and anxiety which come of spiritual aspiration.”

He paused as for applause; the taste of his own phrases was sweet in his mouth.

Cecilia was not in the least disposed to applaud. Her companion's fine words were of small moment to her on this occasion. She cared not a rap for prehistoric times and the golden age; fauns, nymphs, and satyrs alike were but the *dramatis personæ* of children's story-books to her. But for the modern instance, for the woman Jessie Enderby, she cared intensely. That Dr. Symes—whose talent she respected, whom she liked and admired—should feel justified in hinting such strange and awful things about an acquaintance of her own, a woman to whom she stood in a peculiar

relation, whose hand she had held in hers, whose merry words she had so often listened to with an admiration not unmixed with envy, was to Cecilia simply appalling. To think of Jessie as soulless seemed unspeakably terrible. Decidedly Mrs. Farrell was wanting in imagination. Had the doctor suggested that the girl might be afflicted with kleptomania, or guilty of forgery, it would have been far less painful to her. She had no words adequately to express the feeling that oppressed her.

“Oh, this is all very shocking,” she murmured; “very alarming.”

“The abnormal is always more or less shocking, I suppose,” replied Dr. Symes, gravely. “That the abnormal is bound to place those who come into near connection with it in most difficult and trying situations, I have no doubt. We have not, by any means, seen the end of this singular business yet, I fear, Mrs. Farrell. If Mrs. Enderby—I speak to you quite freely—had a child, it might prove her salvation. It would, I believe, develop the latent higher nature in her. It would give her a soul.”

“Ah!” said Cecilia sadly, “but a child is a fearful responsibility.”

“To you, yes,” he replied, smiling; “but it would not be much of a responsibility to Mrs. Enderby, I fancy. To her it would be more of a delightful, animated plaything than anything else. If you will pardon my saying so—ladies, I know, are apt to resent the statement—the maternal instinct in its simple form is not a very high one; it is mainly physical. Still, from the development of that instinct, Mrs. Enderby might get an inkling of the meaning of self-sacrifice; and self-sacrifice, I take it, is the true basis and motive power of all true spiritual life. For the first time she would forget herself—she would love.”

Cecilia Farrell turned to her companion with a certain dignity; and the blood came into her thin cheeks.

“She has her husband, let her love him,” she said sternly.

“Ah! I very much fear nature has failed to supply Mrs. Enderby with any instincts under that head; barring the very common one—we all possess it in a degree—of

making the most use possible of a willing slave."

"There, I trust, you are mistaken," said Cecilia, still sternly.

In sympathy she had taken many steps away from Dr. Symes in the last ten minutes.

"I shall be only too happy that events should prove me mistaken in the case in point, my dear madam," he replied. "One is thankful, always, to find that one has overstated the gravity of any matter."

The music had ceased. The room had grown comparatively empty. The sound of footsteps, the confused murmur of voices, now and again a soft outbreak of laughter, wandered in from the hall and passages outside. Poor Cecilia sat still, looking blankly out over the wide, bright space before her. She was pained and perplexed. She was displeased too; and that with one of the few persons who by habitual kindness had won her regard and gratitude.

Dr. Symes had a sense that the harmony of his relation with Mrs. Farrell had been disturbed, and he regretted it. All the

more so that, in her late movement of severity, she had claimed both his respect and admiration.

“Under happier circumstances, she might have been a charming woman,” he thought. “Poor Colonel Enderby is to be pitied, perhaps, in this also.”

It was so obvious to Dr. Symes that the lady was not paying any attention to him, that he permitted himself to take a good long steady stare at Mrs. Farrell. He had certainly never seen her to so much advantage before. She was well-dressed for once; the excitement under which she laboured had both given her dignity and improved her complexion. With all her peculiarities there was an unmistakable effect of good breeding about her. Her faithfulness and devotion commanded Mortimer Symes' sincerest respect. She was far from being brilliant or exciting; but that she was eminently conscientious and dependable there could be no question. Whether the good doctor had talked himself into an unusual state of exaltation, or whether the atmosphere of a ballroom is

peculiarly productive of romantic affections, I cannot pretend to say: but it is certain that a notion, which for a long time past had furtively and intermittently haunted the chambers of his brain, began to take form and consistence with surprising rapidity. If that venerable lady Mrs. Murray could be got rid of—and he had devised an excellent scheme for her removal—a man might, Dr. Symes thought, do worse than pass the last stages of his earthly pilgrimage with Cecilia Farrell for a companion.

He cleared his throat and adjusted his tie with an air of preparation.

“My dear Mrs. Farrell,” he began, “the garrulity of age, favoured by your courteous attention, has bid fair to run away with me to-night. I fear I have exhausted your patience; and, for myself, have wasted an invaluable opportunity. There is quite another subject on which I greatly desire to say a few words to you.”

He paused. Cecilia looked at him; the doctor’s manner was extremely ornate.

“You must pardon my speaking of my-

self," he continued.—"My position is a singularly independent one. I have no near relatives. Such fortune as I possess is entirely at my own disposal. I am not ashamed to say, Mrs. Farrell, that my income is, at the present time, a considerable one, since it is almost exclusively the result of my own exertions. For a professional man I am unusually well off. At my death a not inconsiderable sum must pass into other hands."

So far he had progressed with ease and determination ; but, really, it was difficult to go on. Dr. Symes leant forward and gazed earnestly at the polished oak floor between his feet, hoping, apparently, to gain inspiration from the well-set boards.

As to Cecilia, she regarded him with surprised and slightly anxious attention. Confidences invariably agitated her.

"You, Mrs. Farrell, with your quick and genuine sympathy, will readily understand that when my thoughts project themselves forward towards the inevitable close, towards that final journey which awaits us all, they are not untouched with gloom. Why, I

ask myself, have I thus toiled and laboured? What is the object of a man amassing wealth—modest wealth, I grant you, as compared with the colossal fortunes of the present day, but still wealth—if he has no child to benefit by it—if no young life is to be beautified and enriched by his past labours?”

Mrs. Farrell made no audible comment. It was trying; she had a great habit of making no comment. Under some circumstances that might be very convenient; just now it was very inconvenient, Dr. Symes thought. He tried to keep up his courage by a mild flight of rhetoric.

“Now that the sun of my existence has, so to speak, passed the zenith, and begun to decline towards the west, I find myself increasingly desirous to create intimate relations for myself, to live no longer in isolation, in solitude, and at a distance from my kind. My dear lady,” he said, turning full upon her, and speaking with real feeling, “I envy you your boy. I have wondered, pondered, asked myself many searching questions on this subject. Can we not, I ask you—and I beseech you

earnestly not to reply without duly weighing my request—can we not effect a combination of interests—a combination which, I allow, will leave me infinitely your debtor?”

Here the doctor bowed courteously to his companion.

“Will you grant me the privilege of sharing those responsibilities of which you are so sensible? Will you reward my true and reverential affection by——”

But Cecilia interrupted him breathlessly.

“Look, look!” she cried; “there is Philip Enderby dancing—dancing with his wife.”

I do not know whether the strength of his professional instincts should be reckoned a credit to him or otherwise; but Mortimer Symes broke off his important discourse with the utmost alacrity, sat up, and peered eagerly among the passing couples for the one to which Mrs. Farrell had drawn his attention.

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed, with a movement of anger, “what an act of insanity! Our friend Colonel Enderby has an absolute enthusiasm for suicide.”

“Oh, go to him,” implored Mrs. Farrell, “go to him; stop him. It is some wickedness of Jessie Enderby’s. Oh, I can’t forgive her!”

The poor woman spoke from the heart, regardless of all minor conventionalities.

“We must not judge the young lady too hastily,” returned the doctor, recovering his usual suavity of manner. “To intervene now would be merely to make an inconvenient scene—to put myself hopelessly in the wrong, and destroy all confidence between my patient and myself. Shall we move? I should be glad to make my way towards the door.”

With many stoppages and delays Dr. Symes piloted Mrs. Farrell round two sides of the large room. It was really a matter of time and of some difficulty. Various persons hailed the good man as he passed, and refused to let him go away in a hurry; then, too, the room was full again, and it was not easy to dodge the dancers. At last, just by the door leading out into the hall, Mr. Drake, breathless, excited, and redder in the face than ever, met them.

“God bless me,” he said, in a low voice, “I thought I never should find you! I don’t want to alarm any one; we must keep it quiet. Nobody fortunately saw what happened. Come out here into the hall. Enderby’s ill, dying—I don’t know what—but they want you. Come away to the library; they’ve put him in there, poor dear fellow. Awful thing, you know, and with that young wife too.”

Talking all the while, and hurrying the doctor along with him, Mr. Drake disappeared within the inner hall.

Cecilia Farrell stood leaning against the wall. She shut her eyes and pressed her long, thin hand hard against her forehead. Dr. Symes and his astonishing and but half-comprehended conversation were blotted out of her mind. Only the image of Philip Enderby remained—Philip Enderby as she had known him, loved him, danced with him over twenty years ago.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH DEATH HAS A MIND TO DANCE TOO.

IN order to explain the episode which proved so startling both to Mrs. Farrell and her companion, Mortimer Symes, the kindly reader must be asked to retrace his steps to an earlier period of that evening of Mrs. Jack Enderby's social apotheosis: asked, moreover, to readjust the focus of his spyglass and contemplate the scene—not from the thoughtless standpoint of the dancers, or from the philosophic standpoint of the doctor, or from the agitated standpoint of Cecilia; but from the simple, practical, and somewhat melancholy standpoint of our friend Philip.

For, alas! things have been going but drearily with poor Philip for some time past;

and there would seem to be but small hope of their mending. What with pain, and weakness, and black haunting nervous depression, he has discomfort enough in his own person to make the days pass heavily. Nor is this physical distress all he has to put up with. Struggle as he may, it becomes ever more difficult to hide the signs of his trouble from the eyes of his charming wife. And, ignore them as she may, the burden of her husband's affliction has begun to weigh on her. It could hardly be otherwise since she was so quick and observant. A hundred little indications of the change that had come over him forced themselves upon her; and the girl's humour began to change too. Her sweetness of temper suffered occasional eclipse; she was flighty, capricious, difficult to please. She seemed to be under the impression that she had come into the world with a divine right to be ceaselessly amused: and if amusement failed, so much the worse for the person most bound by his position to supply it, namely, her husband.

The Colonel worked with pathetic dili-

gence to meet his wife's demands for entertainment. He tried to take a deep interest in any trivial matter that pleased her; encouraged her to go out, to entertain; let her satisfy any passing fancy that took her, and spend money in a rather reckless fashion; let her do what she pleased, so long as she seemed happy and treated him with affection;—do anything in the world, in fact, so long as thereby he could stave off her discovery of the miserable truth that he was a disabled, broken-down man, whose life was hardly worth an hour's purchase.

Then Christmas, that penitential season of the financial year, had come, bringing with it revelations of expenditure so considerably in excess of his income, that Philip had been reluctantly compelled to sacrifice a portion of his capital. He had sold out certain shares, after much bother and worry, to discover, of course, in the end that he had sold them out just at the wrong moment and at a prodigious disadvantage. All this was very far from cheering. If Mr. Bertie Ames or any other of the Colonel's acquaintance were coming

to the rescue they had better make haste about it, or they might chance to arrive a little too late.

It has been said, with a somewhat transparent affectation of cynicism, that life would be very tolerable but for its amusements. The phrase sounds well; it has a ring of disillusionment and elegant fatigue; and it is a very agreeable occupation to coquet with fatigue when you yourself are sound and hearty, and to cultivate a mildly disillusioned tone while you retain a lively sense of personal importance and of the value of your own utterances. Happy the man who is still young enough, in heart and feeling, to play a part—especially, perhaps, the part of lofty contempt for the diversions he largely participates in! When, however, through the operation of unkind fate, that phrase concerning life and its amusements becomes practically true for any luckless mortal, and light affectation passes into actual fact, it is a very dismal business indeed.

Philip Enderby had dreaded this particular evening long beforehand. It promised

to be little better to him than a weariness and a mockery. He would thankfully have avoided going to stay at Bassett, and have remained quietly at home. But two considerations impelled him to overcome his shrinking from the undertaking. Jessie, notwithstanding her growing waywardness, could not endure to be without him. She demanded that her husband should always be in attendance. There was an uncanny element in the girl's absolute abhorrence of solitude. Not that she was afraid of any of those concrete bugbears of sensitive womanhood — such as accidents, fire, burglars, ghosts, thunder, wind in the chimneys, death-watch, mice, or spiders. Both by day and by night, the young lady's wits were very well about her, and she was by no means conspicuously liable to nervous terrors. Her horror of solitude, like her strange horror of sickness and death, was something spontaneous, impossible to be reasoned over or analyzed, only present and imperative.

Jessie's constant desire for his presence had, during the first sunny months of their

marriage, been one of Philip's deepest satisfactions, seeming, as it did, to offer a solid guarantee of the love he so earnestly needed to believe in. Even now, when, alas! the silver cord of affection was somewhat loosed, it supplied a very real bond of union between the husband and wife:—a bond which Philip, on his part, would have endured anything rather than run the risk of severing. Jessie begged him to go to Bassett; was petulant at his half-expressed reluctance.—It was enough.—He would go.

Then, too, an evil spirit of jealousy had taken possession of the Colonel lately. We must not judge him too hardly; the man was very much in love, and was paying a heavy price for his affections, into the bargain. The time would come — was sensibly creeping nearer—when he must leave this beautiful young creature. He knew it; in a way, he had brought that trial upon himself. But, after he had left her, what would happen? Perhaps it was mean and unworthy in him. I cannot say; it seems to me very excusable. Unques-

tionably he began to feel bitterly towards other men; began to regard them as his natural enemies: to regard them much as the doomed, barbarian captive must have regarded the blooming, well-fed, Roman noble, casting glances of ill-concealed admiration upon his faired-haired, blue-eyed wife. The moroseness and savagery, which is latent in all truly masculine natures, put up its ugly head at moments, and asserted its existence rather fiercely in Colonel Enderby. Jessie, he felt, was hardly the woman to break her heart over a sepulchral urn, under the shadow of the authorized weeping-willow.

So it came about that, for two reasons, Philip thought it well to go to Bassett Darcy: and being there, he tried to forget his many troubles, and appear as little peculiar as possible. With physical pain to wrestle against almost hourly, with a mental drama, of a sufficiently penetrating character, acting itself out in silence all day long, it is not easy, one must allow, to be perfectly disengaged, urbane, and indifferent. But Philip applied himself with

praiseworthy persistence to his own business. It was a hard fight ; yet, so far, reason and will bravely maintained the upper hand.

During the earlier hours of the evening he had done his duty by dowagers, various and sundry ; had stood about in doorways, indulging in desultory gossip with the non-dancing, male members of the community. Philip had no notion of posing : perhaps he would have impressed both his wife and society at large very much more deeply if he had. He made commonplace observations ; got tea for old ladies, and ices for young ones ; conversed on the topics of the day in no amazingly original or profound manner ; caressed the ends of his moustache ; contemplated the toes of his shoes ; and, in short, conducted himself generally as all other gentlemen of good-standing habitually conduct themselves at kindred festivities.

Yet, notwithstanding the outward and visible signs of being as other men are, he was vividly aware, all the while, of a delectable figure in a gleaming yellow dress, of a lovely childlike face, full of vivacity

and enjoyment. He was aware, too, that this captivating form and countenance was that of his wife,—of the woman he blindly and supremely loved;—aware, finally, that a black figure was always beside her, whose feet beat out the exciting measure of the valse with hers, whose arm encircled her waist, whose face—and, unfortunately for the Colonel's peace of mind, it was almost always the same pleasant, frank, boyish face—expressed very openly the warmest gratification in being the happy partner of this very charming person.

Though he had never happened to see Jessie dance before, Philip had taken the notion of her doing so quite for granted. His own dancing days were over long ago. Gentlemen getting on in years figuring about freely, appeared to him a doubtfully dignified spectacle; but, to place any embargo on his wife's enjoying herself after this manner, would have seemed to him a most tyrannical act of selfishness. Now, however, he experienced—even in the midst of a series of confidential communications from that responsible and important person,

Lady Melvin, on the delightfully shocking subject of a certain well-known scandal in high life—an increasing sense of irritation and dislike, at last, of unreasoning hatred of this valse—of the languorous, enervating sentiment of the music, of the rapid, yet poised and harmonious movement of the dancers. Philip sat, and stared, and stared before him at the brilliant, swaying, shifting scene; stared till his brain almost reeled, and the whole thing became to him a madness, a horror, unsubstantial, phantasmal, purposeless. Only two persons in all the whirling, drifting throng, retained their reality to him—Jessie Enderby, his wife, for whose peace of mind and daily entertainment he was painfully draining the springs of his own life dry; and Charlie Colvin, the man whose carelessness—unintentional, it is true—had helped to render that bitter sacrifice necessary.

Philip struggled with himself, as we struggle in dreams, when some unspeakable thing seems to press down on us, paralyzing alike all power of speech and action. Would that hateful melody, with its sweet, volup-

tuous cadence, never end? Would those two young figures never cease passing and repassing? For a moment the Colonel had a wild fear that he should do some desperate thing—call aloud, commit some unpardonable folly.

“I have it, I assure you, upon the very best authority,” murmured Lady Melvin, in her fat, comfortable voice, slowly waving her black fan, and turning a large, impassive countenance upon her companion. “On the very best authority. Isn’t it perfectly shocking? What is society coming to, Colonel Enderby? And everybody talks about it too.—Why, girls just out of the schoolroom discuss things now, that gentlemen would hardly have spoken of among themselves, don’t you know, after dinner, in my youth.”

With a fierce effort at self-control, Philip pulled himself together. He felt he must get away, and that immediately, if he meant to keep his head, and not openly disgrace himself.

Making some vague and incoherent excuse to Lady Melvin—which left that worthy

person in a state of combined resentment and mystification—he got up hastily, and made his way towards a smaller and less brightly lighted apartment, opening off one end of the ballroom. This little sitting-room—in which, by the way, Philip had said his last good-bye to his mother long ago—though cleared for dancing, was not apparently very popular with the guests. At the present moment it was wholly deserted.

Pictures of departed Enderbys, somewhat arrogant, high-coloured personages, looked down with their prominent light-brown eyes from out of their heavy gilt frames, as the present head of their house moved with unsteady steps across the room. Philip felt half suffocated; he wanted silence and darkness. Above all, he wanted air—air to relieve this horrible, choking, stifling sensation. The floor, the walls, turned and swam in his uncertain vision; and all the while he still seemed to see those two gay young figures, dancing, dancing, before him.

“Am I going mad?” he cried half aloud, as he dragged back one of the thick cur-

tains hanging across the bow-window at the end of the room.

Behind the curtains was a space formed by the projection of the window. Colonel Enderby threw himself down on the cushioned window-seat, and unhitching the catch of the tall narrow casement, leant out into the chill quiet of the winter night. The sounds from the ballroom hardly reached him here, behind the screening curtains, which had fallen back again into their place behind him.

Outside, the night was frosty and starlight. The ground showed a dusky white, powdered over with a light coating of snow that had fallen early in the day. Immediately under the window, was the broad gravel terrace, running along the southern and eastern sides of the house. Beyond, were the lawns, sloping towards the river. A sharp wind drove small, fleecy clouds, here and there, across the solemn deep of the midnight sky, making the keen glittering stars seem to drive with them in a wild aerial race.

To Philip the biting frost and wind

brought a certain measure of relief. But, still, over the pale lawns those two figures, the light and the dark one, seemed to him to drift on dancing, dancing still, away down towards the impenetrable blackness of the wood and river. Recognizing it all the while to be a mere hallucination, generated of weakness and illness, yet, with a sort of terror, deeply moved, straining his eyes to pierce the half darkness, Philip watched the phantom slowly fade and vanish into the night.

He could not think clearly. He only knew that he was suffering; that he was the sport of his own juggling impressions; that a feverish misery and anxiety possessed him. Supporting himself with one hand against the stone mullion of the window, and resting the other upon the ledge outside, Colonel Enderby leaned out into the cold still semi-obscurity. He wanted to avoid hearing even the faintest echoes of the light, pulsing footsteps, and of that sweet valse; and to steep his soul in the calm silence that reigned without.

He had been, however, but a few minutes

at the window, when his attention was attracted by an indistinct object moving along the terrace. At first the Colonel feared he was still the victim of some cerebral delusion; but the moving object took unmistakable shape as it came nearer.

It was only a small dog—Matthew Enderby's old wire-haired terrier, which, along with all that unamiably old gentleman's other goods and chattels, had come into the possession of his son Jack. The poor little brute had wandered out of the house to escape the stir and bustle earlier in the evening; and now was trotting disconsolately about, vainly searching for some quiet way of slipping indoors again.

Just as he came under the bow-window, the dog's feelings apparently got the better of him. He sat down on the snowy gravel, threw up his grey, bristly muzzle, and broke into a long dreary howl.

Philip spoke to the dog and tried to quiet it; but the creature refused to be pacified. Again the grey muzzle went up. Again the long wailing cry rang out through the keen, frosty air.

The Colonel was not naturally superstitious; but his late sensations had left him shaken, and curiously excited. The dog squatting there in the dim light, and howling, was strangely agitating to him. He tried to drive it away; but it would not budge. At last, Colonel Enderby moved back and half closed the window; then the dog got up and silently trotted away round the front of the house.

As he closed the window, Philip became aware that he was no longer alone. Two persons were talking together, on the other side of the curtains.

“No, it’s really very provoking! I don’t think it’s fair that a married woman should take complete possession of one of our best dancers in this sort of way. I’ve known Charlie Colvin for years. He was at Eton with my brothers, you know; and he always kept in our set. He used to be so jolly if we’d got anything going on at Melvin’s Keeping. He was like one of us, don’t you know, till he came to know her this winter.”

The speaker was evidently a girl. Both

her sentiments and the irritated tone of her high clear treble testified to the fact.

A man answered quickly, in a good-natured, bantering way:—

“Yes, poor Colvin’s very much gone on Mrs. Enderby, certainly. She’s awfully pretty, and he doesn’t mean any harm in the world, you know. But I think it’s silly to get into that sort of state myself.”

“There’s a frightful draught here,” observed the girl. “Let us go back into the other room. He is making the most of his opportunities to-night, in any case. She’s a fearful little flirt. I’ve counted——”

The young lady’s skirts rustled over the bare floor, and her words died away in the distance.

The shock administered by this conversation galvanized Philip into very vivid life. If two men had been speaking he would have shown himself at the end of the first sentence; but he could not make a scene with a lady. He had been compelled to listen and to wait. All his physical ailments, all his morbid perturbations and distresses, were forgotten in those few

searching moments. Jessie, his wife, his darling, was lightly spoken of.

Colonel Enderby flung aside the heavy curtains, careless of who might see him, and stepped out into the room, strong, steady, resolute as he had been on the best day of his life. Indeed, he would not have been quite a pleasant man to cross just then. His face was set like a flint, and there was an ominous blaze in his blue eyes.

It so happened that almost the first person he came across was Jessie herself. She was standing just inside the door of the ball-room, with a little group of men about her—among them Ashley Waterfield, and his wife's *protégé*, Mr. Lewis Vandercrup—a thin, neat-featured young man, with preternaturally small hands and feet—one of the Melvin boys, and the red-haired parson from Priors Bassett, who was chuckling in a stout, unctuous way, and murmuring:—

“Ah! very good, very good indeed, Mrs. Enderby.”

“Pardon me,” said the Colonel, as he elbowed his way through the group, which melted to right and left as he advanced.

The excellent divine lingered longest, not being quick to take a hint. But even he, looking at the new-comer, had an inkling that there was something a trifle dangerous in his aspect; and ended by tacking off rather hurriedly in the direction of his puce-silk arrayed wife.

"Well, if I ever saw a man look as if he was in a devil of a rage, it's Enderby," observed Ashley Waterfield to his companion, Mr. Vandercrup, as he lounged away.

Jessie, however, greeted her husband with her most bewitching of smiles. She was as merry as a cricket, as bright as a bird.

"Where have you been, Philip?" she asked, not giving him time to speak. "You were talking to Lady Melvin just now. From my heart I pitied you! Ah, but that woman is a consummate bore! And then you disappeared. I looked for you; I could not see you. Poor, dear Philip; she was, perhaps, a trifle too overpowering, even for you."

Jessie gave herself a little shake.

"Are you not glad?" she said. "I am having a ravishing evening."

The girl's humour, delicious though it was, was hardly calculated to clear Colonel Enderby's path of difficulties; but the fire both of his love and his anger burned fiercely in him still.

"Come away, Jessie," he said briefly. "I want to speak to you."

She gave him a quick, inquiring glance; then drew herself up, with a pretty touch of dignity, and went into the little empty room beyond. About the centre of it she stopped and turned round.

"Well?" she said, with a note of interrogation in her tone.

More than once Jessie had told her husband that it became him to be excited. Undoubtedly, as the Colonel stood in front of his wife now, he looked extremely well. Jessie remarked it—there were very few things indeed that she did not remark—and it pleased her.

"Ah! *mon ami*," she cried, "but what have you done to yourself? You are splendid, you are admirable."

Colonel Enderby's face did not relax.

"Look here, Jessie," he said slowly;

“you know I don’t interfere with you, as a rule. I don’t ask you to do anything unreasonable; but something has occurred to-night—never mind what, I cannot tell you,—it was infernally unpleasant”—Colonel Enderby ground his teeth together in a sudden fury—“which obliges me to demand a promise from you. Promise me, Jessie, that you won’t dance with that man, Colvin, again to-night.”

There was a moment’s silence; then Jessie answered, gaily—

“You are still splendid; but, unfortunately, my dear Philip, you ask an absurdity. Why should I not dance with the young man again? I grant you he is a simple creature; a little like that”—she shrugged her white shoulders and spread out her hands daintily—“barbarian, stupid, you know. Still, he is nice-looking, and he can dance, but dance——”

Jessie nodded her pretty, curly head with an air of profound appreciation.

The Colonel’s expression remained sternly determined.

“I cannot tell you why I ask this, my

dear wife," he said quietly. "I would not pain and disgust you by giving you my reasons. But the fact remains, Jessie ; I'm in no laughing mood, and this is no laughing matter. Trust me—in this I know best—and give me your promise."

"You become importunate," she answered, looking at him curiously. "To be importunate is to run the risk of being tiresome. Dance with me yourself, then, if I am surrounded with these melodramatic and mysterious perils. It would be a little commonplace, perhaps, to dance with one's husband ; but it would be safe enough in any case. I must dance, you see ; and I have refused the others."

Jessie laid her hand lightly on her husband's arm.

"Come," she said, smiling at him with a touch of malice—"shall we go ? They are beginning to play another valse. I must dance, and to dance I must have a partner. It lies between Mr. Colvin and you."

Philip was in a condition in which the mind refuses to consider possible contingencies ; in which the whole tide of

impulse rushes headlong in one direction. Careless of consequences, conscious only of the immediate demand of the present, he answered after but a moment's hesitation.

"Come, then," he said—"I'll valse with you, Jessie. As well that way as any other!"

"Eh! but that is not a very courteous way of accepting my favours," she responded, a trifle taken aback. "Supposing you dance badly? It is a fearful little experiment; but I resign myself. I am ready—now!"

In speaking the girl had made her way back into the ballroom; and in a minute more they were out in the thick of the spinning, swirling throng.

How will he stand it? Faster and faster grows the valse-time, faster and faster Jessie's feet fly over the polished floor. Once round the big room, dodging, twisting, slipping in and out between the racing couples, and the Colonel tries to halt.

"Go on, go on, this is nothing; you dance superbly, Philip," whispers the girl.

And so on again; who cares for the risk

and danger, the folly, the madness of it? On again with a swift, delicious rush, motion answering instinctively to the enchanting lilt of the music; on again, round the wide, bright room. How will he stand it, indeed?

At the end of that second turn the Colonel paused close to the door.

“Ah! it was exquisite!” cried Jessie, radiant with pleasure. “Why have you hidden your talents like this, Philip? I am delighted with you. I want to go on for ever, and ever, and ever.”

But Colonel Enderby had turned deathly faint and ill. Though his wife was standing beside him, her hand resting with a light pressure on his arm, her laughing face looking up into his, he could not see her clearly. A mist seemed to come up before him and blot out all material objects. Look where he would, he could only see those two figures again, the light and the dark one, dancing, always dancing, till the whole world turned with them as they turned.

He pushed his way back through the little crowd standing about the doorway, into the

deserted room behind. This was horrible; he drew his hand across his eyes with a fierce gesture. He went deadly pale, and a cold sweat broke out over his forehead. He was aware of an agony of pain, which cut and stabbed at his heart, and seemed to drive like sharp sword-thrusts right through him. Jessie had followed him, pulling the door to behind her. Hardly knowing what he did, he clutched at her bare arms to save himself from actually falling.

“Ah, good God!” he gasped, “I can’t bear it.—Promise me, Jessie, as I have loved you—promise me what I asked, now.”

The sudden weight thrown on her, made the girl stagger for a moment; but she recovered herself again immediately. Her rounded, white arms were like bars of iron under Philip’s desperate grasp. The laughter had died on her lips and in her eyes. Her face grew hard, set, almost old. She was perfectly calm and quiet as she looked hastily round for some help or way of escape. It took her but a few seconds to realize the full meaning of the situation.

“Philip,” she said, in a low, incisive

voice, "if you are going to be ill you must come away. People will see you here."

Exerting all her strength, she half led, half dragged her husband across to a door at right angles to the bow-window. Disengaging one hand, she opened it, and, setting her back against it to keep it open, forced him to enter the room within;—a large dark library, with a faint smell of old volumes and leather bindings pervading it, in which, just now, all the furniture from the other rooms had been huddled away, in most admired confusion, to make space for the many guests. The door remained half open, letting in a narrow shaft of light, that slanted, sharp-edged and definite, across a space of carpeted floor, and on to the chaos of piled-up chairs and tables behind. The mass of furniture, with its confused, half-discovered shapes of familiar objects, had a weird effect about it, forming as it did a background to the graceful form of the girl, in her shimmering ball-dress, and to that of the man whom she supported.

"Can you stand alone?" asked Jessie, suddenly breaking the silence with her clear tones.

She turned away, and with all her force dragged a chair out from the stack of furniture. Things slipped and fell away behind it as she did so, with a rattle and snap of dry breaking wood.

“Sit down,” she said.

Philip obeyed her mechanically.

He hardly knew what had taken place during the last five minutes. The racking pain, the sense of suffocation and faintness, the penetrating physical misery, had swallowed up all distinct consciousness. Only when his wife turned and left him, without another word, without a sign of tenderness, did he realize the hideous thing that had happened.

“Jessie, Jessie!” he called aloud after her, putting out his hands in the blind darkness.

But there was no voice, no answer; only the clicking of the lock as the handle of the door turned on the outside and it slipped back into the catch, and the quick beat of footsteps hastening away across the boarded floor without.

CHAPTER IV.

MAN AND WIFE.

CIRCUMSTANCE is cruel to some people : and, at the risk of appearing to deal in paradox, I submit that circumstance was cruel to Jessie Enderby. Under other conditions society might have profited by her charm, her brilliant and inexhaustible gaiety ; and never have dreamed of the lamentable wants in her moral and spiritual constitution. Just those demands happened to be made upon her that she was unable to meet. Let circumstance take the blame, in part at least ; and let us spare the woman as much as we may.

Her one impulse was to get away. When the library door was fairly closed behind her, she paused only for a moment ; and

then turned and ran—as a scared child runs, headlong, not daring to stay or look behind it—across the room, down a long dim corridor, and into the inner hall, whence the main staircase leads to the upper part of the house. Here Jessie stopped. She was breathless; half with the haste of her own wild pace, half with a strong nervous reaction, following the coolness and determination she had shown during those terrible minutes in the library. In her whole life she had never experienced anything like this before. She was wholly possessed with a frantic rage and terror.

Across from the supper-room on the other side of the outer hall, passing among the strolling couples who had wandered out from the ballroom, with his stiff, erect, soldierly bearing, came Berrington, a tray of glasses in his hand.

Jessie waited till he reached the foot of the staircase, and then stopped him with a sharp, imperative gesture.

“Colonel Enderby is ill,” she panted out, in short, broken sentences—“ill in the library. Go to him. Find Mr. Drake.

Don't stand there staring at me ; go to him, I say ! ”

Berrington looked at her in amazement. Her face was blanched, her eyes wide open ; she pressed her hands hard against her heaving bosom.

“ Are you idiotic ? ” she cried passionately. “ He is ill, I tell you—alone there, don't you understand ? Go to him. ”

Berrington set down his tray—regardless of appearances—on the centre table in the inner hall. His scarred face had a strange expression on it ; he spoke almost commandingly.

“ You are coming with me, ma'am ? ”

“ No, no. Why should I come ? I can't come. Go yourself. You waste time. He is alone in the dark there, I tell you. ”

Berrington turned away. He had never been over and above fond of his mistress.

Left alone, the girl flung herself down on the lowest step of the wide staircase. She did not cry ; but she rocked her body backwards and forwards, and clenched her hands in a perfect paroxysm of passion. We all have known, I suppose, the blank, hopeless

fury of childhood—kindled, perhaps, by some very trivial disappointment, prohibition, or mischance—when the dumbly raging little soul dashes itself against the hard walls of fact, and falls back bruised, bleeding, trembling, only to struggle up and dash itself fruitlessly against them again and again. This was what poor Jessie did now. Her feeling was purely selfish. She had not the smallest sense of obligation to her husband, hardly of commiseration for his suffering—only that dreadful furious feeling, that her playthings were all broken, and that nobody was there to mend them; that the world was spoilt to her.

After a while she grew quieter. The dancing had ceased for a time, and people were flocking out into the further hall and dining-room. Jessie's natural vanity came to her rescue; she arranged her dress, which had got disordered in her flight and struggle. She pulled up her long gloves to hide the ugly little marks that Philip's clutching fingers had left on her white arms.—Those marks were very terrible to her. She dragged at her gloves, and almost tore them

in the effort to hide them completely from her sight. She began to wonder whether she looked very strange, whether people would discover that something had happened to her, and ask her questions. She felt very small and deserted, too, sitting out on the big quiet staircase alone, with nobody to take care of her. She began to get a trifle shy. Jessie troubled with shyness was indeed a novelty! She could not make up her mind to start off by herself across the outer hall there, where there were such a lot of people; it would look so odd, so awkward.

She shifted her position a little—sat on the corner of the step; and, leaning her back against the wall, tried to appear quite unconcerned, as though she was merely waiting for an absent partner. All these arrangements, and the new sensations which dictated them, quite absorbed the girl's attention.

A shrill voice suddenly interrupted both her thoughts and manœuvres.

“Why, Mrs. Enderby, what are you doing? Are you sitting out? Well, if I sat out, I should get some gentleman to si

out with me. I shouldn't think you would have much difficulty in getting some gentleman to sit out with you. Here is my cousin, Mr. Vandercrup. Well, if he was not wandering around with me just now, I believe he would be perfectly delighted to sit out with you. But where is your husband gone to? I don't see him anywhere.—Colonel Enderby's the most devoted husband I ever saw, Lewis. I often tell my husband I wish he was as devoted as Colonel Enderby is. Why, now, there is Sokeington. Sokeington, here is Mrs. Enderby sitting out all alone. You come and talk to her. I want to take Lewis to see the family portraits. We can see them very well now the room is empty.—Well, now, Mrs. Enderby, I have provided you with somebody to sit out with. Good-bye."

So saying, Mrs. Waterfield kissed the tips of her fingers; and, wheeling round the somewhat reluctant Vandercrup, bore him away to improve his mind by the study of the defunct Enderbys.

Jessie looked after her with a very mutinous expression of face. She hated Mrs.

Waterfield; but then, alas! she hated so many things just now.

Lord Sokeington sat down on the stairs, one step above her, so as to give comfortable room to his long legs. His cousin by marriage, Mrs. Waterfield, often appeared to him a trifle too forthcoming; he did not greatly admire her taste: but, being naturally very amiable and indolent, it was his habit to accept any situation in which he happened to find himself, without getting into a fuss or attitude of rebellion over it.

"Well, here I am, Mrs. Enderby; left on your hands, you see. You must be good enough to do your best to put up with me."

Jessie turned upon him such a pretty, pouting, half-angry, wholly appealing countenance that the young man was quite overcome by it.

"You look tired," he said kindly. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I have been frightened," she answered quite simply. "I should be so glad if you would get me some supper."

Lord Sokeington smiled. The juxtaposition of ideas seemed to him quaint; but

he expressed the greatest willingness to procure the young lady all that she desired in the way of supper. He conveyed her across to the dining-room, found a comfortable place for her, and ministered with quite paternal solicitude to her material necessities.

"Eh, Jessie, there you are!" cried Jack Enderby, suddenly catching sight of her. "That's right. I was half afraid we'd seen the last of you too, and that would be a pity—eh, Sokeington, wouldn't it? Drake tells me Philip's got tired of it all and gone off to bed, lazy fellow. Well, I must be moving. Glad I saw you, Jessie. I was half afraid there might be something wrong."

Under the combined influences of supper and of Jack's speech—which seemed to have a comfortably commonplace quality about it—Jessie shook off the lingering effects of her fright. No doubt Philip was better; there was nothing very serious the matter with him. Jessie began to revive; began to be entertaining; began to ruffle her charming feathers, so to speak, and turn her bright eyes merrily and fearlessly on her surroundings again. Per-

haps, the playthings were not all broken yet! A rather daring spirit of gaiety returned upon her. Half an hour later she was valseing as light-heartedly as ever with Charlie Colvin in the bright ballroom. Ah! dear world, when we find you are not spoilt, after all, how delicious it is!

But fate had ordained that Jessie's peace of mind should be sadly shaken again before many hours were over.

The grinding of wheels, the red glare of carriage-lamps, the metallic rattle of bits and stamp of horses standing till they were fretted by the frosty air, had all ceased outside the great square house at Bassett Darcy. The last Tullingworth cab, looking for all the world like some gigantic black beetle, had crawled away across the snowy park towards the sleeping village on the upland above. The night of Augusta Enderby's social triumph had passed away, with all its mingled emotions; its pleasures and regrets; its satisfactions, disappointments, and stupidities; its stale jokes, old scandals, new heart-burnings. The dust that had whirled and danced for so many hours,

along with the human dancers, was settling down upon the broad bare floors again. The spacious rooms were empty; the flowers hung limp and withering in the close, hot air. Yawning servants moved to and fro, gossiping lazily, putting out the failing lights, clearing away the unsightly tokens of the finished feasting.

The glory had departed, all the fun and frolic, the music and the movement, were over and done with; and the pallid winter dawn—dim and joyless as the eyes of a dying man—was growing along the eastern horizon, above the level stretches of the grass park, when Jessie Enderby—her pretty face wan, her dainty dress torn, her gloves soiled, the freshness gone out of her garments, and the thoughtless pleasure out of her heart—came unwillingly, slowly, along the passage, and entered the large blue bedroom over the hall.

It was the same room in which old Matthew Enderby died, little more than a year ago. The great four-post bed, with its gloomy, stuff curtains, still occupied its old position. The same old-fashioned mahogany

furniture still stood in solid dignity against the walls ; and these latter were still hung with a style of wall-paper which, thank goodness, is rapidly becoming a relic of a former dispensation in the matter of house decoration. Stripes of formless and incomprehensible, blue-black roses, surrounded with violently green leaves, alternated with stripes of equally formless and incomprehensible trellis-work in two shades of desolating grey. It was not an encouraging apartment at the best of times, and unless the house happened to be unusually full, Mrs. Jack refused to make use of it at all.

As Jessie came wearily into it now, the room had unquestionably a most forbidding aspect. The fire had burned down to a handful of smouldering cinders in the grate. The shutters stood open, and the curtains were drawn back, letting in the first livid glimmer of the coming day.

The girl set her candlestick down on the table at the bottom of the bed ; and then glanced about her with a quick nervous shudder in the ghostly half light. She looked very young, very slender, like some

delicate flower blanched and wilted by rough rain and wind, as she stood there in her crumpled ball-dress.

For a minute or so she waited silently ; then growing fear got the better of her.

“ Philip ! Are you here, Philip ? ” she cried, softly and hurriedly.

Colonel Enderby came forward out of the dusky corner of the large room. He stopped at the other end of the table by the foot of the bed, and stood looking at his wife. He still wore his evening clothes. His face was old and haggard, and showed almost as livid and ghastly as the glimmering window behind him, in the wavering light of Jessie’s candle, as he watched her. His lips were drawn and stiff ; he had a difficulty in speaking.

“ You are very late in coming, Jessie,” he said at last.

“ I stayed to the end,” she answered, “ and then Augusta kept me a long while.”

The corners of Jessie’s round mouth went down ; the rare tears came into her eyes, and ran over her pale cheeks.

“ Augusta has said something wicked to

me," she went on. "She made me ashamed."

The girl looked up at her husband with the frankest trust in her pretty piteous face.

"I was never ashamed before," she sobbed—"never, never in all my life."

The hours of waiting had been heart-breaking to Colonel Enderby. Desertion, cruelty, disobedience were incomprehensible to his faithful spirit. Jessie had deserted him basely, she had been cruel. He could not blink the truth, agonizing as it was to him to admit it. Then, this thing had not been done in a corner. Drake and the doctor, in any case, and his servant—possibly half the neighbourhood, by this time—knew that he had come near dying in one room while his wife was dancing in the next. His pride was cut to the quick. Pain we bear silently by ourselves is almost ease, compared with the pain we experience when others look on with surprise and comment and pity. Jessie had done him a terrible injury. Now, as he stood watching her, he asked himself sternly, Should it

be peace or war?—and answered that for war there was surely cause enough.

“She said to me something coarse, and wicked. At first I did not understand her; but she explained—she left me in no doubt.”

Jessie all the while looked up with that same straightforward demand for sympathy.

“What do I care for one man more than another? I only wanted to dance. As to that stupid boy—oh, I can’t talk about it! It is shameful! shameful!”

The girl put her hands over her eyes and sank down in a sad indistinct heap on the floor.

“You didn’t mean that, Philip, when you asked me to promise you? You could not be so cruel as to think anything bad, like that, of me? I only wanted to dance. I would have danced all night with you if—if——”

Her voice was lost in the storm of her weeping. Flesh and blood could not stand it. The Colonel came across the little space that divided them, and raised up the slight bowed figure. Yes, it must be peace, after all.

"Before God, Jessie," he said, "I have never doubted you in this matter. You have been thoughtless—"

He paused a moment. To tell her what she had been was to embark in a very ugly statement. Philip loved her too well, after all; he could not bring himself to utter it.

"I have never doubted that in thought and word and deed you are as pure as the day."

The girl flung her arms round his neck and pressed her face against his shoulder, sobbing.

"Comfort me, Philip; comfort me. I am so miserable, and nobody is kind but you."

The same hatred of discomfort and trouble which had caused Jessie to leave her husband now brought her back to him. It was all selfish, alas! and yet the Colonel could not resist it. Sadly, and with a knowledge that there must be a blemish for ever on that which had been most precious to him, but still honestly and tenderly, he forgave her. How, indeed, could he do otherwise, as she clung to him in that heart-breaking passion of tears—generated in part by physical ex-

haustion after her long night of dancing; in part by the shock and terror of his illness; and in part, perhaps, by blind gropings towards fuller life of that soul-germ—to quote Dr. Symes—quickened into movement by the hitherto unknown sense of shame;—how, I say, could he do otherwise? He felt dumbly that this was a crisis in Jessie's history. Far be it from him, the man who loved her supremely, to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax.

He did not even try to improve the occasion by stating his pardon in so many words. She was excited, overwrought, in want of rest. With gentle clumsy fingers Philip helped the pretty quivering creature off with her tumbled finery; helped her to bed; laid the bed-clothes softly up over her: and then, worn and broken by pain and illness as he was, sat down by the bedside in the chill, grey dawning, and held her small cold hands in his, soothing and petting her as a woman might, till the bitter sobs grew less frequent and convulsive, and died down in a little pensive murmur now and then.

“Philip, you are very good ; I love you,” she whispered.

The Colonel bent over and kissed her. That kiss ratified the treaty of peace.

“Thank you, my darling,” he said, “for those sweet words.”

Presently she spoke again, still holding his hand, and moving her fingers over the palm of it restlessly.

“We will not stay here ; we will go home to-morrow, and forget all these dreadful things, and be happy. We used to be so happy at first in the summer-time.”

To poor Colonel Enderby his wife's speech was infinitely pathetic. Alas ! the summer-time of their love and of his life, too, was gone past recall. He wondered whether he had not been guilty of a fatal weakness and irremediable error. If he had stuck to his profession, if he had not so humoured Jessie ; if he had taken her out into the rough and tumble of life, and made her submit more thoroughly to the ordinary conditions of wifehood ; lived for himself and for his duty, treating her as an adjunct merely—a very exquisite one, it

is true, but an adjunct still—might he not have saved both her and himself?—In his consuming tenderness for her, he had left her utterly undisciplined, and now—now, perhaps, it was all too late.

Wrung by a sudden perception of his own great folly, Philip Enderby groaned aloud.

Jessie reared herself up on her elbow.

“It won’t happen again, Philip,” she cried.

The Colonel turned to her gently. The tears came into his eyes. He was to blame; he had been culpably weak and easy with her, and so done her a wrong. The thought made him speak very gently to her.

“What won’t happen again, my pretty one?” he asked.

“Why—why—you know,” she said, her eyes wide with alarm. “It was terrible; I could not bear it. You are better, Philip?”

He looked at her for a moment in silence. His head sank on his breast.

“Jessie, Jessie, have you no mercy?” he cried. “Will you never understand?”

The girl dropped back against the pillows, and began to sob again bitterly.

"Oh, don't scold me. I was getting happier. Please don't scold me," she moaned.

There was a silence. He had made his choice long ago; he could blame no one; he was the author of his own fate. Philip Enderby rallied all the stoicism that was in him. He determined to accept the inevitable, and play his part like a man. He turned to his wife and spoke.

"I cannot tell. We must take what comes," he said. "If it happens again, God helping me, you shall not see it happen. Will that satisfy you, Jessie?"

Jessie put out her hand and stroked his cheek.

"You are very good, Philip," she said again. "Will you stay there by me? Then I think, perhaps, I should fall asleep."

CHAPTER V.

BALAAM'S ASS SPEAKS.

It would be very pleasant, about this period, to throw away the scalpel, and shut up the moral dissecting-room, with all its ugly sights, all its humiliating revelations of the weakness, disease, and incompleteness of fallen humanity: all its sad lessons learnt from the examination of things once lovely, but which have gone wrong, and are lovely no longer—useful only as warnings and advertisements, examples of insidious and all-pervading moral and mental obliquity. Pleasant to forget that excess of one quality implies defect of another—to forget that your generous man will almost certainly prove unjust, your just man harsh and unimaginative; that sweetness of temper goes hand in hand with want of heart, and the desire

to please with paltry vanity; that true love will be weighted with weakness and jealousy; common-sense stultified by lack of zeal; and enthusiasm prone to degenerate into fanaticism and hard indifference to the claims of opponents.

It would be so pleasant to turn our backs on all this distressing knowledge—knowledge which makes simple and direct action almost impossible, which complicates every emotion, modifies every conclusion, teaches one to see a blemish in the fairest face, and to detect seeds of folly and incapacity in the noblest character.—Pleasant to turn our backs on all this, to lock up the dissecting-room, with its melancholy secrets; and go away to fresh open places, where the wind rushes up from the sea, and the gulls laugh overhead in the sunshine; while the bees murmur as they dive into the purple heather-bells, and the rabbits play in and out among the gnarled grey roots of the gorse; and the fat white flowers of the bladder-campion bordering the cliff-edge nod gently and fearlessly—as one who is on excellent terms with both parties—

first down to the wrinkled sea below, and then up to the clear sky above. Why should we bother ourselves with all this dreary learning, when the world out-of-doors calls to us with sweet sights and wholesome voices, and an endless spectacle of fecundity and beauty? It would be more profitable, surely, to learn of liberty from the wind and the white-winged sea-gulls; of happy labour from the homeward-bound bee, flying low from the weight of his honey-bags; and of happy leisure from the soft brown rabbits gambolling together among the furze, and ragwort, and bracken?

Unfortunately, however, this is only one side of the picture. If it were not so, one imagines that only born informers and detractors, born lovers of the unsavoury, would ever study the ways of men at all. All pure high-minded persons would abjure the society of their kind; and seek salvation in solitude, in caves of the earth, in forests, and deserts, and mountains.

But, in point of fact, the other side of the picture is evident enough too.—Great black spiders sit in the doorways of their

little tunnels, lined with silver threads, there among the heather flowers, and lay cruel hungry hands on the bee, honey-bags and all, just as he, in sober, business-like fashion, is setting off to his hive. The red fox, with his shrewd merry face, comes out of the oak wood, across the valley yonder, in the dewy gloaming; and nips the tender, shrieking rabbit in his neat white teeth, just as it is skipping down into its burrow. Even the gulls themselves are foul greedy feeders; and have by no means a delicate consideration for the sensibilities of individual herrings or mackerel. Out-of-doors, on the breezy cliff and in the greenwood, pain, injustice, tragedy, are rife too. Bears have not yet ceased to be carnivorous, and developed straw-eating tendencies; and the weaned child will still be safer away from the immediate vicinity of the cockatrice den. For those unfortunate persons, then, who are cursed with a necessity to look below the surface, and haunted with an insatiable desire to see things as they really are, the moral dissecting-room is hardly a more disturbing place than the seashore or the

moorland. And so, reader, after this fruitless attempt to escape from our own shadows, we may as well pick up the scalpel, and go back humbly to science, civilization, and human obliquity again.

The example of human obliquity immediately under consideration is Mrs. Murray. That worthy lady, some few days after the Bassett ball, had reason to believe her daughter Cecilia had received a long letter from Dr. Symes. To say that this interested her is to put the matter very mildly; she was on the tiptoe of expectation.

Cecilia had been silent and pre-occupied all day; she had appeared to avoid being alone with her mother. Mrs. Murray waited, watched, hinted, alluded in conversation to subjects which might offer a good excuse for revelations, if Cecilia was that way inclined.

But Cecilia was not expansive. She devoted the morning to Johnnie's lessons, and the afternoon to her district, bordering on the brickfields. After tea she disappeared for a considerable length of time.

When at last she came back into the bleak, chintz-covered sitting-room, Mrs. Murray's anxiety to know had reached a height at which concealment was no longer possible. The good lady was consumed with a desire for information; still, with all her courage, she hardly knew how to begin.

She sank back in her chair, folded her hands above her large waist, and watched her daughter with hard, eager, twinkling eyes, as the latter, with a great basket full of coarse flannel and calico, sat down by the centre table and began, not very deftly, piecing together some under-garments destined for the unhappy dwellers in the back streets and by the grimy canal wharfs.

Cecilia fitted in the sleeve of an unbleached shirt several times, wrong way up, having a singular incapacity for mastering the intricacies of double gussets. She looked troubled and tired; her forehead was full of lines, as she held the incomprehensible arm-hole up close against the lamp, turning it this way and that, and blinking her eyes over it in hesitating perplexity.

For some time Mrs. Murray sat observing

her; till, at last irritation getting the better of prudence, she spoke out boldly.

“Cecilia,” she said, “you look deplorable. You’ve got something on your mind.”

The suddenness of the address made Mrs. Farrell start, and effectually drove the difficult question of placing gussets back into the obscurity from which it had begun to show signs of emerging.

“You have something on your mind,” continued the elder lady. “It is no good denying it. You cannot deceive your mother, Cecilia. I ask no questions. I never demand confidence when it is not freely offered me:—though, considering the way in which I have devoted myself to you, and in which I have considered your interests, it might not seem unreasonable to some people that I should be confided in. But I trust I have learnt to labour for others without hope of reward—to cast my bread upon the waters. Ah, well!”

Mrs. Murray closed her eyes and sighed profoundly.

Cecilia took a couple of pins from between her lips, and stuck them into the shirt-sleeve

at random, pricking her fingers sharply in her general confusion.

"I meant to speak to you, mother," she answered; "but I wanted time to think, and I couldn't speak before Johnnie."

"Johnnie isn't here now."

Mrs. Farrell laid down her work, and leant her elbow on the table, shading her eyes with her hand. Her heart beat very quickly. She was afraid of her mother.

"Dr. Symes began telling me something the other evening," she said. "We were interrupted. I did not see him again, and I hardly understood what he was alluding to. I had a letter from him to-day."

"Well, well, go on," cried Mrs. Murray, as Cecilia paused.

"It was a very kind letter; he—he asked me to marry him."

Mrs. Murray surged up out of her chair, and precipitated herself upon her daughter; oversetting the work-basket in her haste, scattering wax, tape, and scissors, and sending cotton-reels spinning over the floor.

"Oh, my child, my child!" she cried. "Thank God, my prayers are answered. I

shall see you rich, well cared for, successful, after all ! Dear, good, excellent man ! Never mind if he is not of very good family. At your age, Cecilia, a marriage of reason is what we must look to. Comfort, my dear, wealth, absolute wealth, and a very good position. Johnnie's future secured. You have written ; you have answered him ? ”

Mrs. Farrell released herself gently from her mother's embrace. She had grown very pale, and trembled as she replied :—

“ Yes, I wrote this morning. I posted the letter myself.”

“ Thank God ! ” murmured Mrs. Murray, devoutly, again. “ Faith, Cecilia—faith is a great power. Believe and labour—as I have ; spare no pains, keep the end in view—the reward is sure. That's a very nice house indeed in Brummell Square ; plenty of room for us all, with a little management. Did he make any statement about settlements ? We must go carefully into all that, you know. Mrs. Latimer tells me his income is large, really large. Ah, well—how short-sighted we are ! That business with Colonel Enderby was a dis-

appointment to me last spring, I don't deny. But Providence watches over the widow and the orphan. Here you might have been at this moment, if all one hears is true, with him on your hands, dying : instead of which, my dear, a prospect, an excellent, respectable, dignified prospect is before you ! As I say, never mind about family ; we can't have everything. You'll bring your husband family, you know. It is better those things should be divided, I think ; it——”

“ Stop, stop, mother ! ” cried Cecilia Farrell, hoarsely.

She stood up.

“ You have misunderstood me.”

“ Hey—what's this ? ” exclaimed the elder lady, with a rapid change of manner. “ Don't stand there looking like a mad woman. If you're going into hysterics, say so, and I'll get a jug of water. Cecilia, I'm ashamed of you ! For goodness sake, be sensible ! ”

Nevertheless there was something in her daughter's appearance which distinctly alarmed Mrs. Murray. She seized her by the arm, and shook it with a sudden violence.

“ There, there, speak, can’t you? Speak, and don’t be a fool, Cecilia! ”

“ Oh, mother, forgive me! Pray don’t be angry with me. Perhaps it is selfish; but I can’t marry him.”

Mrs. Murray looked a very unpleasant old woman as she answered. She leant forward, and peered into Cecilia’s pale agitated face, as though she would have liked actually to torture the truth out of her.

“ Don’t dare to tell me you have refused him? ”

Cecilia bowed her head in assent. There was a silence of some few minutes, and then Mrs. Murray spoke in a terrible voice.

“ You are a base, ungrateful woman; you are a bad mother and a bad daughter! I have borne with your stupidity and awkwardness, your mulish obstinacy, all these years. I have spent my money and time and affection upon you, and this is the return I get. Do you want to kill me? Do you want to ruin us?—Look here, Cecilia, you have got to give way, to change your mind. You say you have written. Well, I am going to write too. I am going

to explain and apologize. I am going to say that you were taken by surprise ; that your reply was ill-considered ; that you regret it. I'll apologize ; I'll do anything, say anything, but let that letter stand. Do you hear ? ”

Mrs. Murray had often had cause to lament her daughter's lamentable want of spirit ; at this juncture her daughter's spirit fairly confounded her.

“ You may spare both yourself and me that humiliation, mother,” said Cecilia, quietly. “ I have given Dr. Symes a reason for my refusal which renders any renewal of his offer impossible.”

“ What reason ? ”

“ That I cannot tell you.”

She was still trembling, but no longer with fear. A strange excitement had taken possession of Mrs. Farrell. She held herself almost proudly.

“ Cecilia,” cried Mrs. Murray, in a sort of amazement, “ do you intend to defy me ? ”

“ Yes ; I am afraid I do intend to defy you, in a way,” she answered. “ There are

claims on me, mother, which stand even before yours and Johnnie's. I must keep my own self-respect. I will not sell myself for any one's money. I am sorry that Johnnie should miss the chance of advantages that he might have had; and that you should be deprived of ease and comfort which you would have enjoyed—but I can't help it. I cannot sell myself. My life was spoilt years ago, by breaking off a marriage in obedience to your wishes, mother; it shall not be spoilt a second time, by making one to satisfy them. We are poor; we must go on being so. We are obscure; well, I am perfectly willing to be obscure still. Johnnie will have to make his own way in the world; he must do it then. Haven't I some rights as well as other people? This right, at all events, to refuse absolutely to degrade myself for the good of my family? All my life I have loved one man," cried Cecilia, while her thin cheeks flamed and her eyes were bright with sudden enthusiasm. "I am nothing to him—nothing in the world. If he sees me, it is with embarrassment, perhaps even with dislike. It

does not matter. God forbid he should ever think of me in any other way. I am not jealous of his wife ; I only want him to be happy—happy his own way, with her, not with me. But I can't marry, mother ; I will never marry. I have had enough of that. Give up all idea of it. You have called me obstinate—on this point I am obstinate. You had better leave me alone."

Cecilia, still brave, still defiant, knelt down on the floor, and began gathering the scattered contents of the overturned work-basket together. Almost for the first time she had let herself go : and, for the moment, her revolt filled her with a really magnificent sense of freedom, of indifference, of superiority to circumstance or criticism. She could have set any number of gussets, and set them with faultless stitches, at that moment.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Murray had slunk back into her chair again, in an extraordinary state of perturbation. Balaam's sensations when reproached by the ass must have been mild compared with those experienced by our friend Mrs. Murray, when her

daughter turned upon her in this very unexpected manner. She was quite unnerved. Genuine tears began to make their way down over her rouged and powdered cheeks; her shrewdness and diplomacy deserted her. She was a miserable sight, as she sat there crying, shaking her poor, worldly, old head—with its cap all awry—and harsh-coloured hair puffed out with such youthful archness over the ears, her hard grasping face puckered up and wrinkled, and the red in her carefully organized complexion coming out in all the wrong places.

“Oh, I am a wretched, deserted, unhappy old woman,” she muttered. “It’s a cruel world; everybody turns against you, at last. You do your best for your children, and then they throw it in your teeth, and tell you you’ve spoilt their happiness for them. Thirty, forty, fifty years you toil and moil and fight for them; and give them all the chances that you can get hold of; and push them on; and try to make a position and keep up appearances;—and then they reproach you. It’s a hard, hard world; there’s

no help or mercy in it: and I'm a wretched, unsuccessful, deserted old woman."

Cecilia rose from her knees, came over, and stood by her chair.

"Mother," she said gently, "I know you have had a bitter disappointment; but there is something better worth living for and thinking about than mere wealth and position and getting on, you know. It is not my place to remind you of this. You must forgive me; but I should be so glad to comfort you, and I can't promise you those things."

Cecilia paused; trying, in her dumb, groping way, to find adequate expression for the thought that was in her.

"Can't we forget the world's opinion—it has brought us little beyond worry and annoyance—and think of better and more lasting things?—of religion? I don't mean merely going to church and using certain recognized phrases; but religion of the heart;—a real giving up of our will to God's; a real submission to His ordering; a real faith and trust, and hope—not for reward here in the way of money or

advantages ; but of reward of a purer kind, hereafter. And that not on account of our own merits, but of His great mercy, who gives us far more than we deserve.—I am preaching to myself, mother, just as much as to you. I am very faithless and dull. It is so difficult to keep on every day striving with one's own weak, sinful nature. Work with me, mother ; help and strengthen me. I stand greatly in need of both."

An impatient smile broke through Mrs. Murray's still falling tears.

"I believe you are sincere, Cecilia. You are a good woman," she said : "but I never met a good woman yet who didn't drivell at times, as you are drivelling now. I have my intellects still, I am thankful to say, and there are some things I see very much more clearly than you do. Do you suppose if one has lived for this world till one is seventy, one can turn round all of a sudden, at seventy-one, and live for the other, and find great consolation in doing it ? Changes are not so easily made as that. It is ingrained, my dear, by now. And then, after all, who has any right to blame me ? I have only

wanted what hundreds of people are born to, and take just as a matter of course, as they do the air or daylight, without any worrying or scheming. I couldn't afford to be philanthropic or religious before, and it's rather late to begin now.—You say the Lord is exceeding merciful. Well, then, perhaps He will make allowances for a woman with a small jointure and a large family of plainish daughters. I don't know.—Ring, will you, my dear, and tell Eliza to put a couple of table-spoonfuls of brandy in my gruel to-night.”

How far the signing of this declaration of independence by Cecilia Farrell brought her permanent relief, I cannot say. That it increased her mother's respect for her, and caused the latter to leave her alone in future, in questions matrimonial, is more than probable. But I am inclined to imagine that a lady of Mrs. Murray's temperament, if she abstained from one form of tyranny, would be disposed to balance abstinence in one direction by excess in another. To her self-devotion, and the poor return made to her by her

ungrateful children, she did very frequently refer, both in public and private. Perhaps her words did not carry any deep conviction to the majority—in any case, we will hope so.

Dr. Symes consoled himself with his profession, and egg-shell china. Sometimes, even, in that snug room of his, after dinner, when his reading-lamp was lighted, and the fire crackled pleasantly on the hearth, and some interesting new scientific treatise lay open before him, the doctor caught himself speculating as to whether—in the Palace of Truth—he might not congratulate himself on having had an exceedingly lucky escape.

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER ALL, A REGRET.

BERTIE AMES and Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay were coming up the carriage-drive towards the little red villa. They had been into Genoa. Eleanor sauntered along slowly; she was a little fatigued. In theory, she greatly admired tram-cars as a levelling and democratic institution; but in practice, the noise, crowding, smell of Italian gin, and general tendency toward expectoration endured in these vehicles, gave her a headache, and sorely tried her slightly fastidious taste. It was a good step from the iron gates to the villa, too; and though there was a bracing crispness in the air, the February sunshine was hot and dazzling. The row of crooked fir trees threw blue, sharp-edged shadows along the roadway. The waste

spaces of rough grass on either side were starred with the flowers of the anemone of the Apennines—white, scarlet, blue, lilac, blush pink, and violet—an almost endless variety of delicate shades of colour. In her hands, along with her parasol, Eleanor carried a big bunch of Roman hyacinths and camellias, bought at a picturesque flower-stall in the angle of a great, stately palace in the Via Nuova. The spring had come; not the pale, tentative, pensive spring of our northern climate, but the keen, brilliant, daring spring of the south.

Eleanor sauntered on silently up the road, Bertie Ames beside her. To tell the truth, he was not thinking very much about his companion just then. He was engaged with his own reflections, and entertained himself by humming a few bars from the opening scene of "Faust," *sotto voce*, as he moved lightly yet lazily along.

At the turn of the road, Eleanor sat down on a sloping slab of rock; she wanted to rest a minute, and it was pleasant here, after the noise and dust of the tram. Across the road, in front of her, a great fig-tree—

whose twisted roots clung round the broken rock in among which it grew in many serpentine folds and convolutions,—spread a pale, grey network of smooth, gleaming branches, knobbed with the already formed fruit, against the distant masses of deep wood and steep purple hill.

Bertie crossed the road, leaned his elbows on the natural wall of rock, just below the big fig-tree, and gazed away over the brown vineyards and the town, showing sharp and clear in the sunlight, to the far-off curving coast-line, and the glittering snow-mountains in the west.

His back was towards her. Eleanor felt a wee bit neglected, somehow. It made her think.

Nearly a month had passed since their engagement. It had been a pleasant month on the whole. Bertie was affectionate, attentive: and even when he laughed at her, which he did pretty frequently, there was an underlying tenderness in his manner, which made it impossible for her to resent his sarcasms very warmly. Bertie's conduct had been entirely unexceptionable:

and yet she was not quite satisfied. This engagement had not brought her all that she had expected of it. There was a faint flavour of disappointment in her mind after all. Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay was one of those ardent and generous persons who are liable to make an exaggerated estimate of the possibilities of human bliss; and are slow to learn that nothing in the world will bring them all that they ask for—that, to the end, the vision and the hope are fairer than the realization ever can be. She did not seem to advance in her relation to Bertie, or to get any nearer to him. There was nothing to quarrel with in his manner or bearing towards her: yet she was conscious of a wall of separation between them. Whether the defect of sympathy lay in herself or in her lover she could not tell. Perhaps marriage would set it all right; but marriage seemed still to hang in the offing, so to speak. Bertie had made no further definite proposals. He was very indolent; he was willing enough always to let things be, if the said things were fairly comfortable.

Eleanor sat staring at the pale branches

of the fig-tree and the purple depth beyond, and thinking of all this ;—thinking, too, of the strangely different way of life she had proposed to herself ; of her friend the priest, and the splendid ideal he had set before her. Suddenly the sweet pathetic tones of Bertie's tenor sounded in her ears. He was singing softly to himself that lament for lost youth, and love, and beauty, with which the drama of Faust's fate and passion commences.

To Eleanor, it carried too much meaning. She rose hastily, crossed the road, and touched the young man on the shoulder.

“ Ah ! cousin Nell,” he exclaimed, turning to her with rather a forced smile, and air of self-recollection : “ I find my voice in the spring, you see, as the small birds do : or, rather, as the small birds would do, if they had not all been killed or caged, long ago, by those villainous bird-catchers. The performance was not altogether pretty, was it ? You did well to stop me.”

Something in Bertie's speech—perhaps it was that word cousin—jarred painfully

on his hearer. She took her hand off his shoulder, and drew a step away.

Bertie had turned round. He leant his back against the wall of rock and looked quietly at her. His eyes had still, at moments, that odd likeness to Malvolio's which had formerly so disturbed Jessie Enderby.

Eleanor looked back at him. There was a fine sincerity in her steady gaze.

"The last few weeks, since you came back, have been very happy ones to me, Bertie," she said, in a low voice. "I have had a great deal of pleasure in them, such as I had never expected to have again; and I suppose that has made me selfish. I have let one day slip away after another, and have neglected to think of anybody but myself and you. We have done nothing practical yet about Philip Enderby."

"No; quite true," replied Mr. Ames: "we have done nothing practical yet about Colonel Enderby. It is odd you should mention him just now, because I happened to be thinking about him. I had arrived at the conclusion to let well or ill—whichever

it is—alone, and trouble myself no more about Colonel Enderby or his wife either.”

The sun struck curiously hot on Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay's head. She tried to put up her parasol. But the lace round the edge of it caught in the points of the ribs; and it was some little time before she could adjust it quite to her liking.

“I am afraid I must ask you to trouble yourself a good deal about Colonel Enderby and his wife, all the same,” she said. “I am more anxious about them than ever. I had just arrived at a conclusion, too:—namely, that I shall not be able to rest till you have seen Jessie. For your and my sake, just as much as for theirs, it seems to me imperatively necessary.”

Bertie Ames shrugged his shoulders.

“My dear creature,” he said, “why will you always ask highly embarrassing things of me? Please remember, I am not in the least given to knight-errantry. I don't feel called upon to succour wounded heroes, or rescue distressed damsels. It is not the least in my line. I should make a horrible boggle over it. I am not a professional fine-

fellow of the eleventh or twelfth century, you know ; but an amateur of the latter end of the nineteenth, with a deep respect for my neighbour's small eccentricities, and a mortal dread of putting myself in a ridiculous position."

"Ah!" she cried a trifle impatiently; "that is all beside the point, Bertie. There is no knight-errantry in the matter. It is a question of humanity, of good feeling. You have a power which may be employed for the benefit of a man whom you respect, and a woman, who—who——"

Eleanor paused. It went against her pride to state her deepest thought in words.

"A woman," she added gently, after a moment, "whom you have—loved. Think of them, Bertie; and not of whether you may be putting yourself to some small inconvenience or not. Pray, pray, do as I ask you to. It has been culpably self-indulgent in me not to urge this on you sooner. I know it is right; I know it is for the best."

Mr. Ames was acutely uncomfortable, as he looked down at the shining gravel. He did not see how he could extricate

himself from his present difficulty without behaving rather cruelly to the woman he had asked to be his wife—the woman whom he admired and liked most cordially; whose society he found stimulating and agreeable in a very high degree. Yet he felt it incumbent upon him to speak out, and let her know the danger in which he stood.

“Really, Nell,” he said, “at times you develop the most remarkable power of getting one into a corner, and making one stand and deliver. Listen, and I will expound to you. Love, rightly considered, is a state of mind. Being in that state of mind, I apprehend it is eminently desirable to remain in close vicinity to the person who produced it; lest, not having a legitimate object on which to expend its energies, the state of mind should begin expending them upon some illegitimate one. I have had more than enough of coveting my neighbour’s wife, heaven knows! and am very fully convinced of the futility of that species of amusement;—but I am not absolutely fireproof, all the same. I do not relish the prospect of undertaking this

mission unsupported, you know. Forgive my putting it all so plainly before you, Eleanor. Marry me at once, and then we will go to England together, if you like."

As he ceased speaking, the young man looked up. Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay's eyes were full of a warm light, her cheeks flushed with a dark rich bloom, her mouth was a little open, as if in eager readiness to speak. She was young, vivid, beautiful.

"Ah, you are delicious!" he cried, half laughing. "You women are absurdly enchanting."

Eleanor turned away and walked on hurriedly up the road. She was in a tempest of feeling; it was impossible to answer him moderately just then.

Bertie Ames lingered a moment or two. He threw back his head, flung up his arms, and then let them drop at his sides again. He hardly knew, perhaps, exactly what he meant by the action, beyond a sense that it was a general good-bye to a good many things he had cared for. Then he walked rapidly up the hot, glaring road after his cousin.

"Nell," he said, when he overtook her, "I have bungled atrociously, and offended you. Please forgive me."

Eleanor did not turn her head.

"Do you really care the least about my forgiveness?" she asked.

"Immensely," he answered. "It is everything to me."

"Then go to England."

She stopped, and looked at him somewhat proudly.

"I want no half-hearted affection, Bertie. I can give you my whole heart, my whole life—and I am not prepared to receive a fraction in return for them. Go and see Jessie; go and do what you can for Colonel Enderby; and then come back to me if you want to. Remember, you are still perfectly free. I have told nobody of our engagement. I abstained from doing so on purpose. If you do not care to come back, you can stay away with impunity. You are not in any way compromised."

"Do you take me for a scoundrel or an idiot?" he cried. "Of course I shall come back again. But the conditions are rather

hard, Eleanor; and I have a feeling against this journey. It will bring bad luck to somebody."

"If the bad luck is there, it will come whether you go or not. You do not speak with your usual good sense," she answered.

She moved on up the ascent.

"Will you go?" she asked.

They had just reached the ending of the road, and came on to the open space of the terrace in front of the villa. The monkey, who had been sunning himself on the wall, seeing them approaching, scrambled down and ran across on all fours to meet his master, with strange chuckling cries of pleasure and welcome. Bertie picked the ugly, little creature up and fondled it as he spoke.

"Yes, I will go by the mail train to-night. I shall just have time to pack and eat my dinner."

"Ah, to-night! That is very soon," exclaimed Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay, somewhat aghast.

"You have forced it on me, Cousin Nell.

I would rather get it over and done with. But I warn you it will turn out badly."

He looked down at the monkey, and gently patted its wrinkled forehead.

"The devil, Malvolio," he said, "the very devil."

There was a silence. Eleanor stood with her head raised, looking away over the expanse of purple sea. Bertie could see the pure outline of her profile. It struck him that she looked very handsome, very intense, very sad.

"You will be rather lonely here, Nell, I am afraid," he remarked abruptly.

"I shall not remain here, in any case," she replied. "I have given my landlord a month's notice. The little red villa has become a hateful place to me. It is full of ghosts. Every room is haunted by tormenting memories; every chair and table reminds me mockingly of scenes in which my weakness, mistakes, ill-founded hopes, endless vacillations play a part. The curtains rustle with laughter at my follies. Faces look out of the mirrors over my shoulder, and taunt me with the remem-

brance of broken ideals and trusts betrayed. If we meet again, Bertie, we will meet somewhere else, not here."

She spoke with a ring of feeling which was very penetrating.

Mr. Ames stroked the monkey meditatively.

"Poor little red villa! It is tabooed, then?" he said. "Well, it has seen its share of the human comedy in the last two years, if it never saw it before—which, all things considered, is improbable. I could imagine the house would take a long sleep when your little *ménage* vacates it, Nell—willingly take a rest, and try to recover its tone before it suffers violence from another incursion of us poor puppets of circumstance. Meanwhile, I own I shall be just as well satisfied to think of you in rather more lively surroundings. The influences here, no doubt, have become peculiar: you will be safer away from them. But don't start any new idea, Eleanor, please, till you have seen me again. Don't let any high-flown, sentimental hankerings after contracting a matrimonial alliance

with the Church, for instance, take possession of you. That I most definitely and fundamentally object to."

Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay shook her head with a sigh.

"You needn't be afraid, Bertie. That dream is past and over, alas! like so many more. Come in; you have not too much time, and we will eat our dinner in peace before we part. It is the last meal we shall eat together here; perhaps the last we shall ever eat together at all."

Bertie pushed the monkey up on to his shoulder. It sat there with its knees up to its nose, and with one long, skinny, brown hand clutching tightly at the collar of his coat. The young man came close to his cousin, and put his arm round her waist.

"Come, come, my dear Nell," he said, smiling, "don't let us make such a tremendous tragedy of it. You play the part of a haughty and exacting princess in ancient legend, and set your lover dangerous tasks to perform before you will listen to him. Well, here the lover is going. He obeys you—perhaps, against his better judg-

ment—but then, that should only give an extra savour of sweetness to his obedience. You have your way. What more, in the name of reason, do you want ? ”

“ Something I shall never get, I fancy, Bertie,” she answered ; and her lips quivered a little as she spoke.

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH THE DOMESTIC FOWL PLAYS A PART.

HAS it ever happened to you, reader, in some idle half-hour of a summer's morning, to stand and watch the manners and customs of a respectable, middle-aged hen, with a brood of young chickens?—to observe the care, the anxious consideration with which she treats her soft, callow, peeping family; the energy with which she scratches in nice dry earthy places against the corner of a stack of bavons, or the rich, prolific borders of the manure-heap, or among the rank grass round the water-bucket, to find them succulent or stimulating morsels? Have you heard the agitated cluckings with which she calls any chick of too adventurous or wandering a spirit; or answers the cries of one who, standing on tiptoe, with distended

beak and elongated neck, announces in shrill and plaintive tones its inability to find its way back to the protecting stuffiness of the maternal wing? Does not this excellent fowl seem to you a very embodiment of all the characteristic maternal virtues?

But, since the sun is warm, and the open doorway of the clean wood-shed is a pleasantly shady place to stand in, just watch the behaviour of this diligent bird a little longer. See, now, if a strange chicken—small, soft, and peeping as any one of her own brood—comes towards her, how her wings droop and her tail spreads into a great aggressive fan, while every separate feather stands out fierce and bristling!—how her hard curved beak is darted down at the unhappy, shrieking, fluttering intruder; and how, unless the human spectator comes to the rescue, the poor, little wretch is shaken, pecked, maltreated till the tiny life is nearly or quite frightened out of its quivering body. Is this a true embodiment of maternal character too? It would be invidious to pronounce on such a point. I leave it to you, reader.

Jessie Enderby's husband had forgiven her. And yet, because our actions have a prolonged force in them—like those vibrations of the air which continue a great while after the voice which produced them is again silent—our young lady found the little world in which she moved rather a different place to her ever after that ill-starred night at Bassett Darcy.

The story, both of the serious nature of Colonel Enderby's illness, and of his wife's apparent indifference to his condition, leaked out, of course, as such stories will: leaked out, too, clothed in the darkest of colours, and with a small army of exaggerations, misconstructions, ungraceful hints and suggestions following in its train. A good many persons did not scruple to register their conviction that Mrs. Enderby was a shameless, little flirt; and while they expressed pity for her husband, added that they themselves, in like case, would have behaved very differently. A man should know when to put down his foot. Not to know when to do so, is to write yourself down either an ass or a poltroon. Bertie

Ames had told Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay, long ago, that Jessie would never conduct herself in a way provocative of the censure of society; but then he had neither taken into account the possibilities of adverse circumstances, or the almost unlimited power of misreading evidence possessed by the average human being. Selfishness and heartlessness by no means disqualify their owner from making a good show in the world. It was by bringing against her a charge of which she was wholly guiltless, that local society, in its small way, judged pretty Jessie Enderby, and condemned her. I do not wish to excuse her, or too easily condone her evil-doings; but I must maintain, nevertheless, that she was convicted on entirely wrong grounds.

Some three weeks after the Bassett ball, she received one morning an urgent note from Mrs. Colvin, begging her, if it lay in her power, to pay the writer a visit early that same afternoon. The request surprised the girl. Late events had made the Colvin name somewhat unwelcome to her. But the day was bright; and it was a little

dull at home—Jessie fancied there had been a slight falling off in the number and cordiality of her visitors just lately. Then, too, she really liked Mrs. Colvin, whose large, gentle, motherly presence gave her an agreeable sense of repose and security. She decided to go; though she also decided not to mention the matter to her husband. Philip had grown a trifle fussy and particular, she thought. Collisions were disagreeable; and our young lady objected supremely to that which is disagreeable.

Jessie had learnt to drive herself. And it was with a certain quickening of the pulse and exhilaration of the spirits, that she trotted the handsome pair of carriage-horses along the high-road; swept them round the curve under the railway bridge, scattering dogs and children and lounging artisans—loafing about till their afternoon's work should begin—to right and left; and then sent them on up the wide, main street of the pretty little town. Light natures like our heroine's, meet with manifold consolations by the way. They can live on the surface; and the surface, at all events, can

generally be kept fresh and smart and pleasant to the eye.

“Put the horses up at the Prince’s, William,” she said, standing for a moment on the clean pavement, and giving herself sundry little pats and smoothings to get the set of her clothes just right. “And meet me at Luckcock’s Library at half-past four. Ask for the afternoon letters, please; and see if there is anything for Colonel Enderby at the station.”

Mrs. Colvin received her guest very kindly. She held Jessie’s hand in her soft, steady grasp a little longer even than courtesy positively demanded, and looked at her earnestly, with sweet, questioning, near-sighted grey eyes.

“It is kind of you to come to me at such short notice,” she said.

Jessie smiled radiantly.

“It is fine; I had nothing to do; I was delighted,” she answered.

Mrs. Colvin stood holding her guest’s hand, and looking into her brilliant face with a sense of strangely conflicting feelings. She had an accusation to bring,—and that a

painful one,—against this young creature. She did not approve of Jessie; and yet the girl's youthful beauty filled her with a yearning, wondering pity.

“I am afraid you have been in some anxiety about Colonel Enderby,” she said. “I hope that your coming here this afternoon shows he is better.”

“Oh, he is very much as usual,” Jessie answered, still smiling. “He has an innocent mania about his farm, you know. The farm was to make our fortune. But he has been rather indolent both about the farm and the fortune, perhaps, recently. He has preferred the smoking-room or my society. To-day, however, the farming-mania appears to be in the ascendant again. He told me he was going out to look at the sheep. I like the sheep, too. They are very worthy, well-meaning animals; but there is a certain sameness about them; it is possible to see enough of them. I was very happy to come and see you instead.”

A slight change came over the expression of Mrs. Colvin's fair, elderly face. Decidedly this was not one of her own simple good-

hearted chickens. It belonged to a very different brood.

“I am glad you can give such a reassuring account of your husband,” she said. “We feared, from rumours which have reached us, that he had been seriously ill on the night of the ball at Bassett.”

The subject was hardly an agreeable one to Jessie Enderby; but her blood was still tingling with the healthy excitement of her rapid drive. Like some wild, woodland thing, she was sprightly and glad with the quickening breath of the coming spring. She answered lightly enough.

“Ah! every one is ill at times, I suppose; but it passes again. And when it is passed, is it not best to forget?”

Mrs. Colvin sighed.

“You are very young, Mrs. Enderby,” she said. “Later, it is not possible to forget so easily. But come, sit down here. I have something I want to tell you.”

“I hope it is something nice,” observed Jessie, parenthetically, as she rustled across the room after her hostess, and seated herself by her.

Jessie had always appreciated Mrs. Colvin, who struck her as a well-bred, comfortable, soothing sort of person. But it is extraordinary what a fund of moral courage some of these large, soft, mild-looking mothers are endowed with.

These clinging, dependent women,—who lose their heads in a crowd, are utterly unnerved by the noise and rush of a railway station, faint at the sight of a wound, and shrink away in helpless disgust and terror before rough looks and coarse expressions,—will still, on occasion, when their affections are involved, manifest a daring disregard of conventionalities in speech and action, that would be a sheer impossibility to the bravest man.

Mrs. Colvin had resolved to lay certain—as she believed—truths before Mrs. Enderby: and the gentleness and tenderness of her nature seemed to harden into almost cruel courage. She ignored the girl's little remark, and began speaking in her slow, quiet, ladylike way, as though she was stating the most ordinary of commonplaces. It is one of the advantages of good breed-

ing, that it gives to the possessor of it, an unabashable self-confidence, whose mild unconsciousness makes it only the more impressive.

“I have been troubled and disturbed lately,” she said, “in a matter of very deep and vital importance to me. For the past week I have been alone, having persuaded my son to go away and stay at Pentstock with his sisters. He was unwilling to leave here, but he yielded to my very clearly expressed wishes. During that time I have thought a great deal of you, Mrs. Enderby. At last I resolved to ask you to come and see me.”

Jessie sat with her head a little on one side, carefully unbuttoning and taking off her gloves. “My hands are just a little cramped with driving,” she remarked by the way.

Mrs. Colvin looked at her again earnestly with her questioning grey eyes : but Jessie appeared absorbed in the removal of her gloves.

“I am afraid there is much undesirable gossip in Tullingworth,” Mrs. Colvin went

on. "It is always so, I suppose, in a watering-place. Every little event is instantly remarked and commented on. Certain things have been discussed lately which I think you ought to know of, Mrs. Enderby."

"Ah!" she answered, a trifle impatiently, "that sort of information—pardon my saying it—is not in the least interesting to me."

"If it was merely outside gossip, I should not trouble you with it, be sure," Mrs. Colvin continued: "but it is something which nearly concerns us both, your happiness and mine, and the happiness of those who are, or should be, very dear to us. My son——"

Jessie looked up suddenly.

"Your son — your son?" she cried. "What, then, is your son to me?"

"That is just what I want to know," said the other, quietly. "My boy is changed; he is moody and pre-occupied; he no longer has any confidence in me. Some one has come between us, and has alienated him from me. I could wish no woman a worse punishment than to feel the agony of such a separation. He is too honourable

to tell me who has worked this change in him. I do not go out much, you know, Mrs. Enderby; but on all hands the same name is hinted at. What must I think? I would rather my son was dead than that he should bring disgrace on himself and on his father's name; or that, through him, shame and dishonour should come to another household. I cannot believe that Charlie would have laid himself open to charges of this kind, unless very distinct encouragement had been offered him."

Ah, the poor motherless chick! do you not pity it amid all this setting-up of feathers, this pecking and clucking? I do, from my heart, though the chick is a wilful, wandering, naughty, little thing.

Jessie sat quite still, her eyes glittering with a hard light in them, her lips drawn back, showing her white even teeth.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, in a clear voice.

"Mrs. Enderby, if you have come between me and my son, if you have played with him, I implore you, pause, think;—put an end once and for all to this wretched, dis-

graceful flirtation. The first steps seem such a slight matter, so unimportant, so lightly taken ; but think where they may lead to. Think of your—— ”

But she stopped with a gasp. Jessie's white hand flashed out in a movement of sudden, ungovernable fury, and struck her full on the mouth.

“It is all a wicked lie!” cried the girl, springing up, and standing fierce as a little tigress in front of her—“a wicked, execrable lie! Yes, I will say it. I don't care what I say. Why do you all hunt and persecute and accuse me? What bad minds you must have to think these things of me. Ah, why did I ever come to this wretched country, where everybody is as cruel as they are stupid? Tell your son he has bored me within an inch of my life fifty times over. He can dance, he can fetch and carry as well as another; he is not awkward. See, I give him his due, this precious young gentleman. But, *mon Dieu!* he is dull, dull, dull—dull as your everlastingly grey sky, your interminable fields; dull as your heavy brains, dull as your insolent thoughts

of me.—I cannot stay. Do not speak. I will not hear you ! ”

Still animated by the violence of her anger, Jessie swept out of the room, down the staircase, and out into the street. A bitter, fierce defiance had taken possession of her, very different to her hour of terror at Bassett or to the sense of shame that had followed on Augusta Enderby's scolding of her, and made her take refuge in her husband's faithful love. Adversity, which braces strong, noble natures, as heavy hammer-strokes weld true metal to use and solidity, only mars and ruins slight, selfish, pleasure-needing beings like poor Jessie. They have no power of rising through detraction and injury into a fuller and richer spiritual life ; no power of ripening and mellowing under the influence of searching mental experience. They lose their own peculiar charm ; their careless spontaneity ; the purposeless yet inspiring loveliness we so prized in them ; and present us with no higher grace or virtue in place of it. It is poor work beating butterflies with a cart-rope.

Outwardly calm, but with a growing concentration of purpose, her pretty head held high, and her hands clasped tightly together, Jessie walked through the Tullingworth streets in the thin February sunshine. But her heart was black with hatred; with a sense of unjust outlawry; with a feeling that she was at war with every man and woman she met. She turned into the hotel.

"Tell my servant to bring round my carriage immediately," she said to a waiter standing in the hall. "I will go into the coffee-room and wait."

The man hurried on before her to throw open the door of the said rather gloomy apartment, with its substantial mahogany chairs and tables, its heavy red carpets and curtains, its array of time-tables, hotel lists, and daily papers.

Jessie crossed the room, and stood looking over the wire-netted blind of the window into the street, to catch the first sight of the carriage. She wanted to get home as quickly as might be. She had an announcement to make to her husband.

A gentleman, the only other occupant of the large room, was sitting stretched out lazily in an armchair by the fire. His face and the upper part of his person were completely hidden by the newspaper he was perusing. Jessie was far too deeply absorbed by her own reflections to pay any attention to her companion; and he, on his part, seemed at least equally indifferent to her presence.

The carriage did not come. The girl grew impatient. Perhaps William had not come back from executing the various commissions she had given him to do for her. She turned round, intending to ring the bell and send some one to make inquiries.

Just then the gentleman sitting by the fire crumpled his paper together, and rose to his feet with an irritable, little exclamation in Italian.

Jessie paused half-way across the room. There was a moment of profound silence.

Then she cried aloud:—"Oh, Bertie, Bertie!"

She came across hastily to him, her face suddenly irradiated with a lovely expression,

half smiles, half tears. She laid both hands on the young man's arm, and put up her mouth, in sweet, impulsive, child-like fashion for a kiss.

Bertie had started violently on first seeing her. He went very pale. For a few seconds he hesitated. Then he took her hand in his, and bending down, kissed it, and not her lips.

"Dear little cousin," he said in his soft rich voice, "I was on my way to see you. I have come over on an embassy from Eleanor—from your stepmother. But I intended to present myself, armed with my credentials, with due etiquette and formality to your husband, first of all. This meeting is a trifle premature and disconcerting."

He managed to smile and speak in his usual drawling way; but it seemed to Bertie Ames that the life was going out of him in great throbs of pain. Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay had, indeed, given her lover a hard row to hoe.

BOOK SEVENTH.
THE FINAL REWARD.

CHAPTER I.

FOR THE SECOND TIME JESSIE ENDERBY SEES
A GHOST.

“THEY'RE a rare lot 'er lambs, they are. I don't mind to 'a seen so many doubles since I wer' shepherding for old Mr. Jakeman, over at Wilby-le-Walls, a matter 'er twenty, may be twenty-five year ago, that was.”

The above observations were delivered in the slow and measured cadence peculiar to the Midlandshire labourer, who having already passed middle age, has escaped the deteriorating influences of modern education, and still employs his native dialect with all its legitimate breadth of intonation. The speaker, Essex, with his moon face and short thick-made figure, clad in a long worn overcoat—lined for greater warmth with a material nearly resembling horse-clothing—

and yellow leather gaiters, fitting in close wrinkles tightly round the ankle, thereby bringing the large proportions of his heavy, clay-stained boots into ungraceful prominence—stood in the listless, slouching attitude common to men of his class, contemplating the bleating lambs and the great, broad-backed sheep with an air of stolid complacency.

Colonel Enderby leant on the handle of his long spud and contemplated the lambs too.

There is still a very real satisfaction to be derived from the fact that most of your ewes bring doubles, even when you have reason to believe yourself within quite measurable distance of eternity. The day of small things is never quite done, thank God. Sugar is sweet to the mouth even of a dying man. And our friend the Colonel, on this still February afternoon, when the first touch of spring was in the air, and the blackbirds flirted in merry lover-like fashion up and down the purple budding hedges, and the long tassels showed red on the black-stemmed alders overhanging the brook, was very pleasantly conscious, not of

death, but of life--of reviving interest and quiet enjoyment in things around him.

It was a very good day with him. He had been round the farm, looking at the cows in the Home Close, and at the beasts in the lower meadows, and watching the men and great, gentle, massive-limbed cart-horses at work on the plough land, for the first time since that nasty turn he had had at Bassett, three weeks ago. During these three weeks he had suffered no violent return of pain; he had slowly mended. And Jessie, all the while, had been kind and sweet-tempered to him. She had been contented to stay more at home: and though she had made no direct allusions to his illness, Philip fancied she had tried to be thoughtful and considerate towards him. A little delicate flower of hope was beginning to blossom shyly and timidly in Colonel Enderby's breast. Ah, life is a good gift! Who among us, in his saner moments, would part from it willingly?

With an instinctive drawing towards what is young and has the promise of future fertility in it, he had picked a sprig of hazel, with its tiny point of crimson flower and

green, drooping catkins, and stuck it into the button-hole of his brown shooting-coat. It was not a very effective form of personal decoration, perhaps—inferior, for instance, to Mr. Ames' habitual gardenia:—but to the Colonel it had a tender value, since it symbolized the spiritual blossom of hope that was unfolding within him.

At the same time, he was sensible of being a good deal tired with his walk. The sloping grass field, though he had crossed it very slowly, tried his breathing. Philip was quite willing to rest on the handle of his spud a little longer and listen to Essex:—who, it may be observed in passing, when engaged in conversation, always carefully stood at right angles to his auditor, presenting a large expanse of sallow cheek and rounded shoulder.

Sandy, the coarse-haired, bob-tailed sheep-dog, sat down on the damp meadow grass a few paces off; keeping a sharp, anxious eye on the flock all the while, as the lambs ran to and fro,—kicking and butting at each other, racing in excited, playful little companies wildly over the long smooth ridges,

bucking up into the air with round backs and ungainly pendulous legs, and then rushing back again to demand sustenance, in the most open and unrestrained sort of fashion, from their serious, slow-moving mothers.

“That wer’ the last time we had any luck to speak of, with that flock,” the man went on. “Next year and the year follering the lambs come fine enough; but they went wrong when they got up a few days old—seemed all to windle away, somehow.”

“Seemed to windle away, did they?” repeated the Colonel. “I hope these little beggars won’t take to doing anything of that sort. They look jolly enough now, anyhow.”

“They’re a rare lot ’er lambs, they are,” replied Essex, meditatively. “Old Muster Jakeman, he come down to me when I was in among ’em, one Friday forenoon—Friday it was, or Saturday—happen it wer a Saturday, though it wer Friday, I think:—and he says to me, ‘Essex,’ ’e says, very short and off-handed like, ‘what’s up with these lambs?’ ’e says. ‘They’re ac’shally pined,’ ’e says. I spoke up to ’im, not holding with being blamed when I didn’t deserve

it. 'I tell you what it is, sir; I done my best by these lambs early and late,' I says, 'day in and day out; but they've got something wrong with their insides, sir, as is beyond your cunning nor mine either. I don't understan' it,' I says—no more I didn't; no more I don't to this mortal day. The ewes wer' right enough—but the lambs, they windled. Got just like so many little 'natomies. Law bless you, there weren't a bone in their carkisses you couldn't 'a put yer two fingers round afore they died."

Essex paused, exhausted with this flight of anecdotal eloquence.

"There, fetch 'em up, Sandy," he said.

The lean wise-faced dog sprang off like a yellow streak across the grass, turning and doubling, driving the fat, heavily fleeced ewes, and the bleating lambs—a compact palpitating dirty-white mass—into the farther corner of the wide meadow.

"I must be getting home again," said Colonel Enderby, almost regretfully.

He enjoyed the homely, country sights and sounds, and the pale glint of the early spring sunshine: enjoyed them all the more

keenly at this time of returning activity, after that miserable episode—he tried to think of it as seldom as possible—at the ball at Bassett Darcy.

“Glad to see you about again, sir,” observed Essex, half shamefacedly, as he moved away after Sandy and the flock. “I says to my missus, last night, I says, I seems to miss something when I don’t see the Colonel round most days.”

Philip Enderby was conscious of a heightened sense of pleasure. He was very grateful to any one, gentle or simple, for liking him. The flower of hope blossomed quite bravely as he walked on quietly across the field towards the gate opening on to the road, just opposite the Manor House, whose buff-coloured, stuccoed gables and great red chimney-stacks rose with such an air of mellow old-fashioned comfort, among the budding trees and evergreens.

Just as he passed out into the brown, moist roadway, he heard the roll of carriage-wheels, and the sharp trot of a pair of horses coming up behind him. The Colonel looked round ; and then waited on the footpath.

Jessie drove by at a smart pace, sitting tall and straight on the high driving-seat of the phaeton, and handling both whip and reins in a very workman-like manner. The colour in her cheeks was clear and bright with the humid air and the movement; and her face had a pretty expression of decision upon it, under the sweeping lines of her large black hat.

Philip smiled at her with a certain tender pride as she rattled past him.

“That’s right, put them along, Jessie,” he called after her. “I say, look out for the gate-post, though. Why on earth can’t a woman keep in the middle of the road, I wonder,” he added to himself, “instead of shaving off corners in that crazy fashion?”

Jessie drove on up to the front door; gave her wraps and parcels—Jessie was one of those persons, by the way, who rarely came home without parcels—to Berrington, who came forward to help her with his usual stiff, sober demeanour; and then, getting down, walked back with quick steps to meet her husband.

“My dear child,” said the Colonel; “do, for goodness’ sake, be a little more careful at corners. You were within an ace of running into that right-hand gate-post just now, and then we should have had a pretty smash. Upon my word, I don’t at all like your driving those horses with William sitting behind. An accident might happen half a dozen times over before he could get round to help you.”

“One’s groom cannot sit by one’s side,” she answered with decision. “It looks—like that—all nohow. It is not at all *comme il faut*, I think.”

“I’d fifty times rather a thing looked nohow—as you put it—than that you should run any risk of hurting yourself. It turned me perfectly sick to see you just now.” Then feeling that he had spoken rather authoritatively, he added—“Come along in, and get your tea, and tell me how the world wags in Tullingworth.”

Jessie stuck out the toe of one neat little boot from under the frills of her dark velvet skirt and stamped it on the gravel.

“My feet are frozen,” she said. “I

must take a turn to warm them. Come with me, Philip, round the garden."

Colonel Enderby would have preferred going into the house at once. He was tired; and a sense of fatigue was, he knew well, a risky thing, being often the precursor of active physical distress. Then, too, he shrank from letting his wife see how slowly he found it necessary to walk, or how often he had to stand a minute and rest now.

"Oh, do come!" Jessie repeated, somewhat querulously.

She put her hand into his with a dainty gesture of compulsion. Her charming face was very close to his at the moment. Philip bent down and kissed the cool rounded cheek. Jessie's little tempers were wonderfully bewitching.

"Come along, then," he said, smiling at her. "You shall go for a prowl and warm your feet, if you want to."

The girl slipped her hand through his arm, and they passed round to the garden, and began pacing up and down the gravel path, between the old red brick wall and the tennis-ground. A light wind came

damp and fresh over the stretches of grass-land, and the pale light grew fainter and fainter as the sun sank in the white glistening west. Jessie was silent. She seemed quiet and absent. Colonel Enderby, as he moved beside her, fell into a vaguely pleasant reverie, begotten of the stillness and tenderness of the spring evening.

“I met Bertie Ames this afternoon,” said the girl abruptly, at last.

The Colonel stopped short, moved a step away from his wife, and stared at her in undisguised amazement.

“Bertie Ames!” he exclaimed—“Bertie Ames! Why, what the devil is he doing here?”

“You cannot be more astonished than I was,” she answered. “He has kindly taken the trouble to come over to England to see us. Mamma, it appears, desired it. He left Terzia in a great hurry, and had not time to write. He intended coming out here to-morrow to call on you, after sending over to announce his arrival. I met him quite by accident. We had a long talk. Bertie said a number of remarkable things.”

So far Jessie had spoken with a cold self-restraint very unusual to her. Now she came back to her husband's side, and took his arm again.

"Let us walk up and down, Philip," she said. "I must move about; my feet are cold, you know."

They recommenced pacing up and down. The Colonel was staggered by this surprising piece of information. The charm of the spring day had suddenly departed. He felt a terrible distrust of what might be coming.

"Bertie has changed in some ways," Jessie continued. "He said things I did not at all like. He has taken to giving admirable advice; and it sounded a little ridiculous coming from him, somehow. I am not sure that it did not amount to being almost offensive."

Philip glanced at his wife sharply; but she was looking straight before her.

"Bertie is going to do an extraordinary thing. He is going to marry Mamma," she said.

The Colonel gave a quick sigh of relief. It seemed as though a weight had been

lifted off him—a weight which had pressed on him, at moments, ever since his first meeting with Jessie, long ago. He felt very thankful.

“I am glad,” he remarked, presently. “Though, all the same, it appears to me that Mr. Ames’ good fortune is very much in excess of his deserts.”

Jessie held up her head stiffly; her voice shook perceptibly as she spoke.

“I am not glad. I know Mamma is young still; but I do not like it. It is confusing and unnatural. Everything will be different now—the little red villa is spoilt to me, and I was very happy there, sometimes.”

Colonel Enderby stifled the reply that rose instinctively to his lips; stifled, too, the movement of jealousy, which his wife’s evident emotion provoked in him. He could afford to be generous. Mr. Ames was going to marry Mrs. Pierce-Dawnay—the Colonel was, indeed, truly glad.

But Jessie seemed to have an unconquerable fit of restlessness upon her.

“I must walk,” she said again, after a minute or two.

She turned, and passing along the farther side of the tennis-ground, between it and the sunk fence, took another path, which leads up by a gentle slope ending in a flight of moss-grown stone steps, to a straight walk—beyond the trees and shrubberies—bounding the Manor House grounds on the east, and affording a pretty extensive view over the surrounding country.

The late conversation had given Philip a good deal to think about. He followed Jessie quickly and mechanically, without any thought of himself. At the top of the steps, however, he was very forcibly reminded of certain unpleasant facts by a loss of breath, and a sharp stabbing sensation in his throat. As he stood panting and trying to get his breath again, he glanced anxiously at his wife. But Jessie was pre-occupied; she was not observing him.

She had crossed the walk, and leant back against the ivy-covered wall which divided it from the high-lying pastures beyond. The mellow brick-work and multitudinous ivy leaves formed a finely toned background to her figure. A great web of semi-trans-

parent cloud spread across the western sky, through which the low sun shone with a faint, colourless radiance. The pale light fell softly on the girl's rich dark dress and on her large hat, leaving her face in shadow, as she stood looking down. She clasped her hands tightly together with a strained nervous action.

"Philip," she said at last, in a hard voice ; "it has come to this—we must leave here. I must have a change. You have always said you would do your best to make me happy. Keep your word—let us go away."

Colonel Enderby's expression darkened with something besides bodily suffering. He leant heavily on his spud, and answered with the carefulness and deliberation of one who finds speech difficult.

"I thought you liked your home, Jessie?"

"So I did, at first. But, as Bertie used to say—not the Bertie I saw to-day ; he indulges in moral aphorisms worthy of a schoolgirl's album ; but as Bertie used to say, in the old days, before his very surprising regeneration — one gets beyond everything in time. I have got beyond this

place and the society of it. I have squeezed it dry"—she made a very expressive motion with her hands—"and there is nothing but the rind left. The people are stupid; but stupid!" she cried with an outburst of vehemence, looking up at her husband.

There was a steely brightness in her eyes, and her face was curiously set. Jessie looked older, she looked dangerous. Pride and disgust made it impossible to her to repeat the story of her interview with Mrs. Colvin; but the memory of it inspired her with a strange intensity of manner at this moment.

"The people here do not understand me," she went on; "they are beginning not to like me. I must have something fresh."

"Well, what do you want?" asked Philip, with the same carefulness of utterance. From physical causes he could only trust himself to say a few words at a time.

"It has not turned out a success here," she replied. "The last few months have been wretched; they have been a great disappointment to me. I want to go far away and forget it all."

“Practically, that is not an easy thing to do,” said the Colonel. “It costs a lot of money to go away, at short notice: and as to money, we are in rather low water just now, I’m sorry to say.”

“Oh, I have thought over all that. You can realize.”

“Realize?” he repeated.

“Yes; make a clean sweep. The stock on the farm is worth a good deal; you said so yourself only the other day. There is all our furniture; it is valuable. I only bought the most expensive things. There are the horses. I shall be sorry to part with them; but it would be too much trouble to take them with us; and we could get very good ones, I suppose, in Paris or Vienna.”

Philip Enderby looked at the girl in utter bewilderment.

“Paris or Vienna!” he exclaimed. “My dear child, what on earth are you talking about?”

“Why, this, this!” she cried excitedly. “I want to go away to some great city, where life is full and tumultuous and stirring; where the action is rapid; where there

is constant amusement ; where there is not time to consider and to think ; where there is plenty of sound in the air, and of light and glitter in the streets. Don't you feel the wearying stagnation of this miserable place ? I have tried England ; and England will not do for me. Let us make a clean sweep of everything, and cut ourselves adrift. You always say you love me, Philip ; then give me what I ask for. Let us go."

A strange uncertain smile, that had very little of amusement in it, came across the Colonel's face. He turned and looked into the pale misty sunset ; and—he could not help it—his eyes filled with tears. He had settled down in this quiet home with such a gracious sense of content and well-being. The wide, green, pastoral country, with its yearly round of simple natural occupations and interests, had satisfied some of his strongest and most wholesome instincts. The late granted satisfaction of his affections in love and marriage, and his subsequent return to the scenes and associations of his youth, had rounded life for Philip, and given him a second spring-time such

as seldom falls to the lot of a man who has set foot on the barren tableland of middle age. Even during the last few months, while the shadow of sickness and anxiety had covered him, the farm and garden, the woods and fields, the twitter of birds in the grey mornings, the thousand changes of cloud and sunshine, calm and storm, had soothed, and fortified, and helped him very really. To give up all this for a wilderness of brick and mortar; for the bold careless splendour and equally bold and careless shame of a great city, struck him as almost too bitter a sacrifice. To go away and leave all that was so dear to him—beloved with the intimate and vital affection which is bred in the very bone and blood—to go away and die in a strange land! Jessie's proposition was preposterous: it would have been almost comic in its glaring incongruity, if there had not appeared to be an alarming completeness in her conception of it.

Philip was weak and tired; he was not equal to arguing with his wife.

“I didn't expect this, you know, Jessie,”

he said slowly. "It has taken me by surprise: and I am not very quick, I'm afraid, at getting hold of a new idea."

"Our reasons for coming here were two," she rejoined, with a certain finality in her tone. "You wanted to be near Bassett, and you wanted to hunt. I most distinctly have no intention of going near Bassett again, after Augusta's behaviour to me; and it seems that you have quite given up hunting—so there is no valid reason why we should remain."

"Ah, those were our only two reasons for coming here, were they?" said Philip, with the same hopeless kind of smile. "I had fancied there was more in it than merely that. However, no doubt you know best, my dear. I think we'd better go in. The mist is beginning to rise; you may catch cold."

Jessie moved to the head of the steps. As she passed him she gave her husband an odd furtive look.

"There are cleverer doctors in Paris and Vienna than there are here," she said, in a low voice. "Perhaps, for your own sake, Philip, you had better go."

“Be honest, Jessie, be honest,” cried the Colonel, with a movement of keen distress and anger. “For love I would do anything for you, God knows; but you can’t buy me.”

The girl made no answer. She went on swiftly down the path: and it was not till she nearly reached the house that she turned and looked back at her husband.

He was a long way behind, standing still, right in the middle of the walk. Jessie was seized with sudden dread. She called to him. At first he did not answer. She waited a minute; then her own fear made her go a few steps towards him. She called again.

“Why do you stand there? Why don’t you come in, Philip?”

The Colonel motioned her away with a passionate gesture.

“Go indoors,” he said hoarsely; “go indoors, Jessie. Never mind me. Go in. I’ll come on presently.”

She paused for a moment—listening—watching him intently. Then she went on hurriedly round the corner of the house.

Dr. Mortimer Symes stayed at the Manor

House till late that night. Berrington, as he helped him on with his overcoat in the hall, when at last he was leaving, ventured on a remark.

“This was a worse attack than the other, sir,” he said.

“Colonel Enderby has been desperately ill to-night,” Dr. Symes answered seriously.

Berrington passed his hand scientifically about the crown of the doctor's hat before presenting it to him.

“Will the Colonel get round, sir?” he asked.

Dr. Symes shook his head.

“I greatly fear not. If he could be spared all anxiety and agitation, his life would be prolonged, probably. But the mischief is grave, and it is of a nature which leaves no hope of actual recovery. He has complained of pain in the throat to-day; that is a new symptom, and a very alarming one, I regret to say.”

Dr. Symes took his hat.

“You have my instructions?” he added. “I shall come over again to-morrow morning.”

Berrington assented. When the doctor had finally departed, he went back quietly to the smoking-room.

Colonel Enderby sat in an easy-chair by the fire. He leant forward, with his elbows resting on his knees, in a nerveless attitude. His eyes were closed; his face was drawn; he looked fearfully exhausted. As the servant came in, he opened his eyes and raised himself, with a perceptible effort.

"I'm better," he said. "I believe I can get upstairs, Berrington, if I take my time about it, and you help me. It must be late, and I don't want to keep Mrs. Enderby up."

Berrington stooped down and began gathering some newspapers together that had fallen on the floor.

"Mrs. Enderby sent down to ask how you were about half an hour ago, sir. She sent word that she didn't wish to be disturbed again. She gave orders that the north bedroom was to be got ready for you."

The newspapers rustled as Berrington smoothed and folded them, and laid them

on the lower shelf of the what-not, against the wall. He put the fire together with a few skilful touches, occupying himself with unobtrusive employment till his master should give some further order. At last he had performed all the small offices that presented themselves; then he stood waiting in respectful silence.

Philip Enderby looked up at his old servant and spoke. His manner was calm; but his eyes were those of a man utterly broken-hearted and despairing.

"You can go, Berrington," he said. "There's nothing more you can do for me. I'll stay down here for the present."

Discipline is stronger even than sympathy. Berrington noiselessly opened the door, and went out into the dimly lighted anteroom. Then he could not contain himself any longer. No one was within hearing, and he spoke his mind.

"Damn that woman!" he said aloud. "It was the ugliest day of the poor Colonel's life when he first set eyes on her—the little jade!"

As for Philip Enderby, he sat quite still,

leaning his head on his hands. Some agonies are dumb. They cannot translate themselves into articulate speech, or even into articulate thought. But the last act of the tragedy had come. Jessie had given her husband his dismissal: and—God help him—he knew it.

CHAPTER II.

THE COLONEL IS TEMPTED TO THROW DOWN
THE CARDS.

THE smoking-room at the Manor House struck Dr. Symes as a peculiarly cosy and cheerful apartment, when he entered it next morning. The large sash-window looks out due south over the tennis-ground and garden; and at this hour the sunshine slanted in at it, lighting up a quaint series of old coloured sporting prints that adorned the wall opposite the fireplace, and illuminating a chalk drawing of Jessie Enderby hanging over the writing-table. The drawing in question was a very clever one. In it the artist had succeeded in giving that subtle suggestion of individual character which has since gone far to secure him a conspicuous place among our

modern portrait painters. Fred Wharton had caught and rendered admirably the irresponsible, sportive, puck-like quality of Jessie's beauty.

A large dark bookcase, containing a library very symptomatic of its owner's tastes, filled up the further end of the low room. Over the chimneypiece was a high wooden rack fastened against the wall; on which rested a couple of fly-rods—done up in neat grey water-proof cases; a rifle and a double-barrel shot-gun, exhibiting, under the careful hands of Berrington, the highest degree of polish wood and metal could be induced to take; some whips and spurs, and miscellaneous odds and ends of a sporting order; and in the place of honour, just over the mantelshelf, a sword—the steel scabbard of it giving off a keen, cold dazzle of light.

The morning was remarkably mild and fine. The window had been thrown wide open, and on the ledge, just outside, sat Jessie's fluffy black cat, daintily washing his face with his cushioned paws, his attention centred very completely upon his own sleek, well-favoured little person.

Colonel Enderby stood by the open window, his back to Dr. Symes, as that gentleman, with short halting steps, entered the room. The doctor was not easily taken off his guard; but he could hardly restrain an exclamation when his patient, turning round, came forward to greet him.

The Colonel was well-dressed, as usual, and had the same air of spotless freshness and cleanliness about him. Nevertheless, a singular alteration had taken place in his appearance. His thick hair and heavy moustache had been getting very grey for the last three months, it is true: but this morning they were blanched as white as snow. The effect was startling.—Perhaps it was the result of contrast. His eyes appeared vividly, almost preternaturally blue. They were sunk in his head, yet were very wide open, the upper lid being almost hidden under the curve of the eye-socket; while they had a distressing fixed stare in them, as of one who still sees, indeed, but to whom the object seen conveys little or no intelligible impression.

“A decided inclination to pressure on the

brain. I feared something of the kind last night," thought Dr. Symes to himself. Outwardly he assumed an extra flavour of his habitual urbanity.

"I am glad to find you down already, my dear Colonel Enderby," he said, shaking hands with his patient. "I trust this is not merely another testimony to your remarkable fortitude, but a sign that you are really feeling better."

"Yes, I suppose I am better," replied the Colonel—"as much better as I can have any reasonable hope of being."

"You have a magnificent constitution," began the doctor, in a tone of encouragement.

Philip leant back against the embrasure of the window.

"Have I?" he said. "Well, I can't say that just now I am very glad to hear it. I feel uncommonly like a broken-down old cab-horse; broken-kneed and broken-winded—well between the shafts. The poor old beast remembers better times, Dr. Symes—cheery days long ago across country: and it's no very great consolation to him to

learn that he and the cab are not likely soon to part company."

Philip put his hand out and began stroking the cat. But the creature got up, stretched with slow and dignified indifference, moved along the window-ledge just far enough to be out of reach, and then calmly reapplied its attention to the completion of its toilette.

Dr. Symes was silent. He perceived that his companion was not in a condition in which it would be of any advantage to attempt ordinary mild inanities in the way of comfort. It would be better to let Colonel Enderby have his say out. He was evidently labouring under acute excitement of some kind. If he gave vent to it in speech, it might be a relief to him. Dr. Symes waited.

Philip watched the cat for a few seconds. Then he turned again to the doctor.

"Well, every dog has his day, and I've had mine, I suppose. Ah! good God," he broke out suddenly, "if I could only be in the thick of it all once more—you can't think how it all comes back to me—hear

the roar of the guns, and the shout of the men, and smell the powder; if I could fight!"—he set his teeth and looked across at the sword hanging against the wall yonder—"yes, fight just once more—at bottom I am the veriest savage—instead of sitting rotting here day after day, eating my heart out over trouble that can never be mended!"

He dashed his hand impatiently across his eyes.

"You must forgive a sick man's grumbling," he went on, more quietly. "When one ails like a woman, one takes to complaining like one, I suppose.—The old horse will keep on his legs as long as he can, after all, just from the old habit of going. And then some fair morning the poor brute will be too far gone to draw the cab any longer; then they'll put a halter on him and lead him away by the little back streets, so that people mayn't see him, to the knackers."

Philip turned away and pressed his forehead against the cool glass of the window.

"That's how it ends," he said—"how it ends, ah me!—and the cruel thing is, that

last morning is sometimes over-long in coming."

Dr. Symes was deeply moved; he could not trust himself to speak. He walked to the other end of the room, and stood looking at the backs of the books in the shelf. When he came back, Colonel Enderby had recovered his self-control.

"Pardon me," he said; "I believe I have been guilty of making a great fool of myself. I have had a bad night. I am not very steady this morning."

Mortimer Symes drew forward a chair, threw one leg across the other, and prepared to deliver a little oration.

"My duty, and I may add, my privilege, Colonel Enderby, is to postpone the advent of that last morning as long as possible. We all quarrel with life at moments, I suppose; but the quarrel, after all, is a transitory one. The deeper feeling, the instinct and impulse, of every healthy human being is in favour of life, not of death. To my mind this love of life, implanted so universally in our nature, is the dispensation of a wise and merciful Provi-

dence. It must be revered, and not outraged. As I said before, my dear sir, you have a magnificent constitution. In your case, with reasonable care, life may still yield you a measure of enjoyment and satisfaction. It may be prolonged without becoming an intolerable burden either to yourself or those whom it is your first duty to consider. But a little common care and forethought are undeniably necessary. You have disregarded my injunctions, and overtaxed your strength in the most wanton manner. Yesterday, it appears to me, the attack was produced mainly by too long abstinence from food, and by over-fatigue."

Dr. Symes paused. His patient stood staring silently out of the window. The doctor began to fear his words had been pretty well wasted. He shifted his position, and added, with considerable emphasis—

"Your continued silence concerning your state of health has been, believe me, an almost culpable exaggeration of chivalrous sensibility. You must positively indulge in it no longer. We must institute a new

régime altogether. I propose saying a few words to Mrs. Enderby myself before leaving here to-day."

Colonel Enderby faced round upon him quickly. The vague, fixed look passed away, and his expression grew perfectly definite. At the mention of his wife's name he regained his normal manner and bearing; and became once more the quiet, dignified gentleman whom Dr. Symes had, from the first, so warmly admired.

"Forgive me," he said; "but that will be unnecessary. I shall myself explain matters to Mrs. Enderby. All this, as you will readily understand, cannot fail to be very distressing to her. It is only right that she should hear of it from her husband."

"I understand perfectly," rejoined the doctor. "But, under existing circumstances, I strongly deprecate your undertaking an explanation which may lead to agitating conversation."

"That, unfortunately, is unavoidable," said Philip, simply.

Dr. Symes bowed. He was conscious of receiving a rebuff; but he bore Colonel

Enderby no grudge for administering it to him. His dramatic sense was satisfied by the fact that his patient, even now under the heavy pressure of illness, held to his original determination, and so stoutly refused to own himself beaten. Constancy of purpose appeared to him as great as it is rare among the virtues. During the remainder of his visit he kept the conversation in strictly technical and professional channels.

And, in truth, Philip had not spoken without due consideration, actuated merely by a desire to shield Jessie, or by a passing feeling of the moment.

During the past night, sitting there alone, while the clocks struck hour after hour in the silent house, the Colonel had been terribly honest with himself. He had faced the situation; he had realized the purport of it with appalling clearness; he had parted sternly with all illusion. The old necessity for straightforward practical action was strong in him still. He had got his marching orders, so to speak—well, then, he must obey them. There was no longer any place

for doubt, for hope, for hesitation. He had ruined his career. He had thrown away his life for a thing that had played him false—for a thing that could hardly, indeed, be said to have any real existence at all outside his own imagination. He had been fatally deluded, he had fallen into a deplorable weakness and error. His great and noble love was wounded to the death, stricken, fainting, bleeding. He had no hope for it of recovery or returning. All he asked for it now was a still and silent death-bed, free from prying eyes and whispered comments, and the vulgar curiosity of idle persons: and, lastly, a reverent and decent burial—that it might lie in some quiet place, its brief glory and long sorrow alike blotted out and forgotten.

With no ingenious phrases, but in voiceless inarticulate fashion, he recognized and admitted the mysterious limitations of Jessie's nature—recognized that what went to make her inimitable personal charm went also to make her incapacity for looking at life from any but her own standpoint, that her fascination and her

selfishness were, in fact, synonymous ; saw that her purity took its rise in absence of human passion, just as her gaiety took its rise in some radical defect of human sympathy ; saw, too, that her quick observation and practical ability were the result of a singular shallowness of feeling.

I do not mean to imply that Colonel Enderby treated his wife's temperament scientifically, and drew out a neat schedule of her peculiarities. It was in no cool, nice, progressive spirit of criticism that he arrived at these conclusions ; but rather in the scorching lightning flash of a blinding conviction. He had fought against the truth—fought in gallant, reckless, chivalrous fashion. He had given her every chance. But fact is stronger than any man's will, or than any man's love either. It crushes down, down, down on us till denial is no longer possible. The beleaguered city is starved out. The struggle is over. It remains only for the famine-wasted garrison to make the best terms it may, subject to honour, with the conquerors.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH LOVE LOSES THE GAME, YET WINS
THE RUBBER.

MR. AMES'S premonition that his visit to England would be productive of bad luck to somebody, was not, as the event proved, unfounded. It went far to hasten a catastrophe. Jessie Enderby, her whole being in fierce revolt from the unjust accusations brought against her, had experienced a happy unreasoning revulsion of feeling at the first sight of her old comrade. Bertie was here; she was very fond of Bertie. The sky cleared suddenly. Everything would come right again somehow.

But the young man's words and manner, above all, the news of his engagement to her step-mother, had only plunged poor Jessie deeper into disappointment, gloom, and rebellion. He could do nothing for her,

after all. He had merely come to read her lessons of submission and duty like the rest; and, unfortunately, such lessons only bored and enraged her. She had fallen back upon her husband. Philip was very good to her—kinder than any one. She would get him to take her far from her present vexations and miseries. The world is wide, somewhere she might still enjoy herself.—Then even Philip failed her. He was ill, and that disgusted and frightened her. She was furious, merciless, desperate.

Soon after Dr. Symes left him, the Colonel went in search of his brilliant young wife. He had not seen her since their parting the evening before in the garden. He had remained downstairs all night; and this morning, beyond an inquiry through the medium of Berrington, Jessie had given no sign. Philip shrank from sending for his wife, or even asking where she was. It seemed an indecent publishing of the alienation between them. He thought she might not have come down yet—Jessie was not famous for early rising—so he went through the anteroom and hall, up

the polished oak staircase, the broad steps of which twinkled where the light took them, and along the landing to the door of her room.

It stood ajar. Philip knocked; and, as there was no immediate answer, he pushed it open.

The room was a small chaos of trunks and boxes. On the bed, piled up one over the other, were the contents of Jessie's wardrobes, her dresses, jackets, mantles—a rainbow of soft colours and rich, dainty fabrics;—the floor was strewn with charming little boots and slippers and mysterious paper boxes;—the dressing-table was encumbered with half-packed jewellery and ornaments;—and about it all lingered that indescribable, permeating sweetness which seems to cling to certain women's garments, and is so singularly agreeable to the senses.

Kneeling before a big dress basket, sorting, arranging, packing, with rapid, skilful fingers, was Jessie's French maid—a plain, shrewd-eyed, well-dressed person, whose elaborate *coiffure* provoked at once the admiration and envy of her fellow-domestics. As the

door opened she glanced up sharply; and, catching sight of the Colonel just behind her, gave a little scream.

“Ah! a thousand pardons, monsieur!” she cried, rising hastily to her feet. “I was startled for the moment, not knowing that monsieur was there.”

Colonel Enderby looked round the room slowly, unable at first to take in what it might all mean.—“*Le pauvre cher homme*,” as Sidonie said later to Berrington, “just then he was terrible. He had the face of a corpse and eyes of fire. During my life I cannot forget it.”

At first his fears outstripped the truth; he thought Jessie was already gone.

“Where is your mistress?” he asked hoarsely.

“Madame went down some half-hour ago. No doubt monsieur will find her in the drawing-room.”

The Colonel drew himself up, and looked very straight at the woman.

“Put all those things back in their proper places, do you hear?” he said. “Mrs. Enderby will not leave home at present.”

“*Bien, monsieur,*” returned Sidonie, with perfect sweetness and composure.

And she began to empty the dress basket again with great alacrity.

Jessie could not help being effective; it was as natural to her as her love of music or of dancing. When Colonel Enderby entered the drawing-room, he was presented with a little picture which to a man in a less cruelly serious frame of mind could not have failed to appear really delightful.

The coloured blinds were drawn partly down, and the sunshine came in through them, filling the pretty room with a warm diffused glow of light. Jessie was lying at full length on the low sofa set across one corner of the room. She wore a loose white cashmere morning gown, which fell in a dense, soft mass of drapery about her slight rounded figure, and formed an agreeable contrast to the dusky orange-red cover of the couch. A basket of half-torn letters and papers stood on the floor beside her. She was very pale; there were dark circles round her closed eyes. The lustre seemed to have gone out of her beauty: yet it

was great still. And there was a languor in her attitude which had in it something very appealing.

Even now, notwithstanding all that had come between them, in looking at his wife Colonel Enderby felt a great wave of tenderness pass over him.

“Jessie,” he said quickly, “what’s the matter? Are you ill?”

She turned her face to the wall, keeping her eyes closed, and seeming to shrink away from him.

“I have not slept. I have had a lot to do; I am tired.”

“Poor child!” said Philip, gently.

And truly he pitied her—pitied her as one pities some creature of another race, which one craves to help and cannot. The bitterest drop in his cup of sorrow, perhaps, was the knowledge that vitally this lovely woman, whom he had loved so passionately, had always been infinitely far away from him in spirit and in heart. Except on the mere surface of life, they had never had any real ground of meeting.

He came on a few steps nearer to her.

In doing so he suddenly caught sight of his own face in a mirror on the wall. The Colonel started, paused; and then moved back and sat down on a chair just behind the head of the sofa, where Jessie could not see him, unless she rose from her present recumbent position. He leant forward, resting his hands on his knees, holding his head up stiffly, and staring straight before him across the pretty room.

“Jessie,” he began, in a low voice, “I have come here to speak to you. I want you to listen carefully to what I say. You needn’t move or get up; just lie still if you’re tired—I can talk to you best, perhaps, so. I am sorry to trouble you at all; but it is positively necessary we should come to an understanding. I’ll say my say as shortly as I can.”

The girl made no reply.

“You remember what you asked me yesterday? I promised to think it over. I was prepared, even though the cost was a heavy one, to do what I could to please you; but something has occurred since that settles the matter, I’m afraid. I am

sorry on your account, Jessie—but I shall not be able to leave here.”

Philip waited a moment. Jessie lay quite still.

“I am very ill,” he went on slowly. “I’m sorry to distress you, but it is best to be plain, and for some time you must have guessed how things were going. I’m very ill. There can only be one end to it.”

Jessie put up her hands and pressed them feverishly over her eyes.

“Don’t tell me any more,” she moaned; “Oh, don’t tell me! Am I not unhappy enough already? Have not I had enough to bear? Let me go without knowing.”

Colonel Enderby’s head sank lower. His face grew haggard with emotion.

“Ah, dear me!” he said; “but it has come to this, that I must tell you. I have been silent as long as I could be. God knows,” he went on bitterly, “I would have died a hundred deaths rather than have confessed my love and asked you to marry me, if I could have foreseen such sorrow would have come on you through me. I believed myself to be stronger than most men this

time last year. I did not come to you with the dregs of a worn-out constitution. I am innocent of any sacrificing of your young life to my own selfish greed of happiness. I had not the faintest suspicion that there was anything wrong with me. You believe that, at least, Jessie, don't you?" he demanded hotly.

"Believe it? Oh, I don't know!" she cried, with her face half hidden among the cushions. "What difference can it make my believing? You are talking about a year ago. A year ago, a century ago, it is all the same. What does it matter if here, now, to-day, I am miserable?"

The Colonel bowed himself together and rested his head in his hands. There was no hope, no comfort left. He had known that, ever since Berrington had brought him Jessie's message last night. And yet, as the girl forced the truth home upon him by her every word and gesture, his pain grew almost greater than he could endure. His wife was miserable. In a way her misery lay at his door. It was frightful to him.

At last he drew himself up, and spoke again clearly and steadily.

“Look here, Jessie! I am not squeamish: I am not trying to deceive myself in this matter. I know, to my sorrow, that you don’t like sickness and sick people. I will do my best to conceal all that is unpleasant and distasteful from you. I’ll keep out of your way; you shall see as little of me as possible. But understand this—you are my wife still, and you are a very beautiful woman.”

Philip’s breath came short and thick; he could not get on for a minute or so.

“I will have no scandal. While I live you will remain here with me. Don’t be afraid. I know how to respect my word. I shall not annoy you, or ask anything from you beyond the barest toleration and commonest courtesy; but we will have no scenes, no recriminations. There must be no occasion for gossip and common talk about our relations. You will remain under the same roof with me, and we will keep our secret, till—till——”

He ceased abruptly.

While her husband had been speaking, Jessie opened her eyes, raised herself, and turned towards him. As he uttered the last words she broke into a loud, piercing cry.

“Oh, Philip, you are changed; I do not know you! Go away—ah, go away! It is horrible. What has happened?”

The Colonel did not move.

“I’ve grown old,” he said slowly; “that’s all.”

Jessie gazed at him for a few seconds in silent wonder, as though fascinated. Her lips parted, and the expression of fear grew and deepened in her eyes till it amounted to absolute agony.

“Shall you die, Philip?” she whispered at last, in an awestricken voice.

“Yes,” answered Colonel Enderby, quietly; “I hope so.”

There was a space of dead silence.

To the Colonel it was a space of dreadful and paralyzing suspense. He could say nothing more; only wait, listening in breathless expectation for his wife’s next words. He noted, as so often happens in moments of supreme mental excitement, a number

of little ordinary matters with curious distinctness.—Noted the comfortable crackle of the wood fire on the hearth, and the tick of the tall inlaid clock in the corner, beating its regulation sixty seconds to the minute with something of aggressive indifference to the human tragedy playing itself out so close by. And all the while Jessie leaned on her elbow, resting her rounded chin in her little pink-palmed hand, and gazed at the man who for love of her had voluntarily condemned himself to such cruel suffering, with the same pale, lovely, terrified countenance.

At last Philip could stand it no longer. He faced round.

“Speak, Jessie, speak. Say what you like, only put me out of this unspeakable torment.”

The girl flung herself down face foremost upon the couch again.

“Oh, set me free!” she cried—“set me free; let me leave you to-day, while I care—while I am still sorry and love you!”

“You have never loved me,” he said: “you don’t even know what love means.”

Jessie did not heed him.

“Don’t keep me here ; let me go to-day. I have made all my arrangements. If you keep me, I shall grow wicked. I can’t help it ; I am made like that. I hate what is sad, and I shall come to hate you, Philip. Let me go to-day, and then I shall think of you as you were—not, not as you are now. Ah ! it is the merest farce our staying here together ! I can never feel to you again as I used to. It will be maddening. Think what you are condemning me to ? I might as well be shut away in a prison. What does it matter if people do talk ? Haven’t they said bad enough things to me already ? And if I am gone I shall not know it. Set me free, Philip, or I shall hate you ; and I don’t want to do it,” she moaned—“indeed, I don’t want to, but I shall not be able to help it.”

For a few seconds Colonel Enderby sat quite still. His lips were parched, his throat was as dry as summer dust, his temples throbbed as though they would split ; yet he was chilled to the bone, and the cold sweat stood in great drops on his fore-

head. By sheer force of will he mastered himself, stood up, and, coming forward a few paces, looked down at his wife, as she lay still shaken with the now ebbing tide of her passion.

“At the risk of making you hate me, I shall keep you here, Jessie,” he said sternly. “I don’t do this for my own sake, Heaven knows ; as far as that goes, I should be thankful if we never met again. What torture do you suppose can be more scathing than that of knowing myself loathsome in the eyes that have been dearer to me than anything else on earth ? You will not be the only sufferer ; I shall have my share too, never fear.—I keep you for the sake of your own honour. If people have, as you hint, spoken lightly about you, they shall have no cause to do it again while I live. And, after all, you need not fret so very much about it—you’ll get away soon enough. You won’t have to put up with me very long, I fancy, at worst. Strong men die hard, they say ; but I don’t think a man can feel as I do now, and bother Death greatly by keeping him waiting.”

He moved away—went across the room nearly as far as the door. And then, because true love has in it, I suppose, when all is said and done, something divine and immortal,—the Colonel stopped, hesitated, suddenly turned back; and came and knelt down beside the sofa.

As he bent low over the young girl, Philip Enderby's face was as the face of an angel—awful in its tenderness, its pardon, and in the purity of its devotion.

“Jessie,” he said, “my darling, my love, my bride, put your dear arms round me once more, for the last time. I will never ask you again, trust me—never.”

He kissed her eyes, her lips, her bright hair, and passed his hand down over her lithe form, from throat to ankle, while she shuddered and shrank away under his touch with speechless emotion. Then he unclasped the soft white hands that clung so unwillingly about his neck, and laid the girl, swathed in her long white draperies, back softly and reverently upon the tawny cushions.

“Farewell,” he said. “Henceforth we

will meet only as strangers. Yet God keep you always, my fair child. For me it has ended badly, alas! but I do not complain. I too have had my beautiful days."

CHAPTER IV.

PHILIP ENDERBY FINDS HIS WAY HOME.

IN a sense it may be said that suffering supplies its own antidote. Nature, forced beyond a legitimate point of endurance, reacts upon herself, and takes refuge in callousness or insensibility. Certain it is that when the last few searching yet illuminated moments of his interview with his wife were over, Philip Enderby fell into a condition of singular mental apathy. He was still conscious, it is true, of being bowed down by the weight of a heavy tribulation ; but his perception of the extent of that tribulation became indistinct ; his sense of the situation was deadened. His misery was no longer active, full of force and energy : but dull and slow, as the sob

of the dying storm when the morning breaks dim and sullen over turgid sea and wreck-strewn shore, where the tempest beat out the madness of its fury through the long night.

He went back to his room, sat down near the open window; and stared, with sad, fixed eyes, out over the tennis-lawn—on which robins and starlings hopped to and fro, searching for worms in the moist grass,—to the meadow, with its great stag-headed chestnut trees, that raised their ragged branches towards the pensive blue-grey sky.

Exhausted with excitement and his night of watching, the Colonel, after a brief period of semi-consciousness, slept.

He dreamed that he stood once more in the glaring Italian sunshine, on the terrace of the Villa Mortelli. Jessie, in her simple, light cotton dress, was beside him—brilliant, merry, smiling, her arms full of great red roses. She wanted something which he was powerless to give her, and coaxed and pleaded with him in pretty, laughing, child-like fashion.—And then, somehow, the scene changed. She had got Bertie Ames's

monkey in her arms instead of the roses. She was going up a cold, wide, white marble staircase, which seemed to stretch up and up, far out of sight; and Philip followed her, always just a few steps behind. He strained every nerve to get nearer to her; called to her, implored her to wait for him: but still she flitted on lightly in front, always just out of his reach, while the monkey, looking over her shoulder, grinned and pointed at him. Philip was faint and terribly weary. He could not move fast, and she got farther and farther ahead. Sometimes she looked back, smiling gaily, seeming half inclined to stop, her soft rounded cheek lying against the monkey's wrinkled brown one in hideous proximity—and all the while the stairs stretched on for ever and ever. Philip was driven forward by a maddening necessity to overtake the girl, to clasp her to him, to hold and keep her. But he was very, very weak—it was impossible, hopeless. Suddenly there came a great sound of rushing water. Jessie flung back a high massive door that loomed up in front of her, opening on to vast spaces of drifting

gloom and vapour full of hurrying shapes. The monkey's face had changed into a man's now, which Philip knew, and yet did not know.—He had seen it somewhere; but he was sick with fruitless effort and bewildered—he could not remember where. He called aloud to Jessie once more, desperately, wildly; but she neither stayed nor answered. The door swung to behind her with a clang. And she, and the thing she carried, fled away, and vanished in the driving mist.

With his arms outstretched, the sound of the closing door in his ears, and the cry on his lips,—“Lost, lost!” Philip Enderby awoke.

In this work-a-day world high romance only deigns to visit us at intervals. Between whiles we have to deal with plain, prosaic, vulgar matters, which we shall reckon an indignity or a relief, according to our humour. The first thing that met Philip's distracted gaze, when he opened his eyes, was the scarred, weather-beaten face of Berrington, as that functionary entered the room, carrying a luncheon-tray.

“ Shall I bring it to you there, sir, or will you come across to the fire ? ” he asked quietly.

The transition of thought seemed to Philip too grossly incongruous in his present state of agitation and excitement. He put out his hand with a sharp movement of repulsion.

“ Oh, put it where you like ! I don't want anything,” he said.

Berrington, however, was not disposed to take an offhand refusal of this kind. He drew up a table, and put the tray on it, neatly setting the glasses in order, and turning out the corners of the white napkin.

“ It's past two o'clock, sir—quite time you had something,” he said, with a touch of respectful authority.

The Colonel shook his head in disgust.

“ I can't eat. They say a man makes a good breakfast when he's going to be hung ; but it's too much to expect him to have an appetite when he's in purgatory.”

Berrington bent down and poured some brandy into a tumbler with careful exactness.

“ I'd give my right hand gladly to see

you out of this, Colonel," he said; and his hard voice trembled.

Philip looked away over the quiet garden. He stood too sorely in need of human sympathy, just then, to be able to reject any that came to him.

"I believe you would—and I am grateful to you. You've been the best servant to me a man ever had, for years. But you will never see me out of this, except one way."

It was a little time before Berrington answered.

"You must eat, sir, all the same," he said presently. "There's no gain, I can see, in starving."

Food, which brought back a measure of physical strength, brought with it a renewed capacity of mental suffering. For so long every thought and aim of Philip Enderby's existence had centred in his wife, in her happiness, her amusements and employments: and now it was all over between them. His mind seemed a blank. The present was incomprehensible, the future inconceivable. He felt as one who has lost a limb. The brain still sends out its message; but instead of

the answering movement, there is only the weary ache of severed nerve and muscle—only the horrible knowledge of mutilation. And then, too, the memory of that ghastly dream possessed him. Turn where he would, he still seemed to see the monkey's hateful changing face, or the girl's hastening figure.

An imperative desire for space, for the free air, came upon him. He picked up a hat, and, passing through the anteroom and hall, went out at the door, and along the carriage-drive towardsthestables. Hewalked quietly, stopping now and again and resting, for exertion was difficult to him. Still, he felt easier and less distressed out-of-doors.

The stables are almost hidden from the windows of the Manor House itself by a thick belt of lilac and laurel bushes, backing the circular space of grass before the door. They consist of a range of rather fine old red-brick buildings, with high-pitched tiled roofs, freely coated with grey and orange lichens, while the front of them is covered in closely clipped ivy. The clean neat yard was empty, the groom and stable-helper having gone to their dinner.

The Colonel had wandered on aimlessly ; there seemed no reason for going one way rather than another. Then, because the day was soft and mild, and because he himself was purposeless and weary, he went and sat down on the old stone mounting-block beside the stable door. The shadows of the bare branches of the neighbouring trees flickered to and fro on the worn brick pavement at his feet. Some flies, revived by the warmth of the morning, and counting, like silly prodigals, on the immediate arrival of summer with its unlimited pleasure and plenty, had crept out of holes and crannies, and buzzed drowsily among the pungent ivy-leaves on the wall behind him. The wind was backing from south to east, and the tarnished gilt vane on the end of the stable creaked and grated as it turned unwillingly in its rusty iron socket. Perched aloft, on the topmost shoot of a young silver fir in the shrubbery, a thrush was singing ; and the short broken cadences of the bird's song formed themselves into a series of quaint phrases and questions in Philip's dulled brain. He sat quite still. He could hear

the horses munching their corn in the stable through the half-open casement above him, and the short, muffled stamp of their hoofs on the bedding; and all the while the thrush sang on.

It came over him that the thrushes had sung like that in the merry spring-time at Bassett Darcy years ago, when he was an ugly, lanky boy, petted in secret by his mother, and knocked about a bit by handsome, high-spirited Matt, who found in him so willing an admirer and vassal. But the birds' songs, alas! carried a very different message in those far-off days, to the young lad with all the world before him. They sang to him of fame and fair fortune, of love, of bright eyes, and of the sweet mystery of maidens' kisses; of battle and danger, and of glory; of honour and faith, and of high courage then. And of these three last and best things, perhaps, the bird sang still.—Philip Enderby was worn and broken; he could hardly tell. But for the rest, he knew it sang all sadly—of grief that knows no remedy, of pain that knows no assuaging, of disillusion and disappointment,

of fond purposes broken like withered twigs by the harsh winds of law and fate; knew that it questioned, half mockingly, if silence, after all, is not kinder than speech, and darkness kinder than light, and death kinder than life. And through all the sad song memories of the old home, which he had loved and lost, to which he had turned with strong yearning and desire in the hour of his prosperity, called aloud to Philip, now in the hour of his adversity, to come back—back, and look again on lawn and wood and river; to come back and dwell for a little space in the magic land of childhood, that is for most of us the Land of Promise too—a Land of Promise which, worse luck, unlike that of the children of Israel, lies behind us, and not before.

There was a sound of footsteps. William, in his tight-fitting, drab stable-clothes, came, whistling cheerily, back from his dinner, with a new halter in his hand. Seeing his master, he looked at him queerly for a moment: and then his hand, halter and all, went hastily up to the brim of his hat.

Colonel Enderby rose stiffly from his seat

on the mounting-block ; yet he had found a vague promise of alleviation in the midst of his misery.

“ I’ll get home,” he said half aloud ; “ get home, and see it all once more before I die.”

He called to the groom, who was unlocking the harness-room door.

“ Put the saddle on the mare, William,” he said ; “ I want her. You needn’t take her round. I’ll wait here till she’s ready.”

It was over three months since the Colonel had ridden. The unexpected order and strange alteration in his master’s appearance struck William pretty forcibly. He was a spare, lean-jawed fellow, blessed with a small enough habit of observation outside the strict limits of his calling ; but in this case he aspired to have an opinion of his own. He gave Colonel Enderby another look, and then observed, with awkward hesitation—

“ She ain’t been out of the stable to-day, sir.”

“ Well, she’s all right, I suppose ? she’s sound ? ”

The groom shuffled his feet a little, and passed the back of his hand across his mouth.

“Oh, she’s sound enough!” he answered. “But I was thinking you ain’t been riding much, sir, lately, and you might find her a bit over-fresh and heady.”

The words were kindly enough meant; but they carried a sharp sting of vexation to Colonel Enderby. This slight opposition made him only the more obstinately determined to have his own way.

“It’s not my habit to give orders twice over,” he said curtly.

“Beg your pardon, sir,” murmured the groom, as he stepped inside the harness-room, and took a bridle down from its place against the matted wall. “I’m blessed if the Colonel looks any more fit to get on that ’ere rampageous ’os than a week-old baby!” he said to himself.

A wretched sense of restlessness was upon Philip Enderby still—a feeling common alike to disease, and to what we call sorrow; but which, perhaps, is really only a subtler form of disease. He wanted to get over to Bassett directly. The big house, he knew,

was empty, Jack having had a pretty sharp touch of gout—consequent on rather too high living—and having gone off to Brighton to recruit, with Augusta and the children in his train. Philip would have the place to himself, and that he was glad of. But it seemed such a long time to him waiting here. He wondered, half angrily, whether a groom had ever been so slow saddling a horse before. As to the risk he incurred in taking a long ride his mind was unhinged by illness and mental anguish and he was past thinking or caring about it one way or another. He only wanted to escape, to get home.

A little scuffle and scrimmage as William led the great handsome hunter out of the doorway, and Philip mounted and rode away.

The mare, as had been predicted, proved very sufficiently troublesome. A long rest had cured her strained shoulder, and, like Jeshurun of old, she had “waxed fat and kicked.” She was in a very larky frame of mind, delighted at getting out of the stable, and prepared to tax her rider’s horsemanship pretty shrewdly.

Perhaps it was just as well so. Colonel Enderby settled himself down in the saddle. Old habit and a sense of excitement, possibly the superabundant vitality of the great headstrong beast under him, roused him into fuller life, and lightened the load of his sorrow for the time being. It was wonderfully pleasant to him—even now, when things had reached this desperate pass—to find himself across a horse again; to fight a little with the splendid animal that resisted and defied him, and, by patience and determination, to bring it gradually under control.

The mare's vagaries kept him fully occupied till he had passed out of the iron gates—through which Jessie had swept in so recklessly the previous afternoon, returning from her meeting with Bertie Ames. Nor did she subside into a decent and restrained manner of going until, after passing the church and the long straggling row of half-timbered houses, which form the end of Broomsborough village in that direction, the Colonel found himself fairly started on the Slowby high-road.

After crossing the red-brick bridge spanning the brook, a tributary of the Tull, that drains the winding valley between Claybrooke and Cold Enderby, there is a short hill. At the top of it Philip checked the mare. He turned sideways in the saddle, rested his hand on her sleek quarters, and looked back.

Beyond the silvery line of the brook, lying warm and sheltered on the southern exposure of the rising ground, the cottages showing white among their little gardens, was the village he had just left. Beyond, again, where the rich, fertile bottom-lands trend away to the right, he could see the green rolling pastures of his own farm, over which he had dawdled so peacefully and unsuspectingly the day before.—It seemed years ago that he had stood chatting with Essex about the stock and that “rare lot ’er lambs!” The southern windows of the Manor House caught the sunlight, and glistened, pale squares of brightness, among the dark trees above the sweep of the meadows.

The Colonel gazed back long and wist-

fully; but he could see nothing clearly. Those distant, flickering spots of light danced before him. His eyes were full of tears.

“I did the best I could to make her happy. Ah, Jessie, Jessie, you will never know how I have loved you!”

His voice broke with a bitter sob. It was so utterly vain, so infinitely sad.

“If it was only all over!” he said to himself.

Then Bassett Darcy seemed to call aloud to him again to come home and rest. What use could there be now in looking back either actually or in spirit? He set his face like a flint; choked down the half-uttered cry of despair; turned in the saddle again; gave the mare her head; and let her go forward at a quiet, steady pace over the strip of rough grass by the road.

And so Colonel Enderby rode on up the long valley, with Melvin's Keeping, its woods and deer park, lying misty in the waning sunlight on the right. Sometimes he passed a farmer's tax-cart, with two broad-backed swaying figures in it; or met

a rumbling waggon crawling slowly along the muddy road. The smoke of a passing train left a soft, wavering trail of white over the pastures and dark hedges. A couple of teams moved along the high range of plough-land on the left, the men and horses growing large and distinct against the background of dull sky as they climbed the shoulder of the hill. On past Lowcote House, with its shadowy, brown plantations and pleasant shimmering ponds, where the coots and moorhens chase each other, with clear liquid cries, in and out among the tall reeds and cat's-tails. On through Lowcote village; where the children, their day's work over, rushed clamouring out from the low sandstone schoolhouse, with its row of large dusty windows, and clustered in groups and gangs on the footpath, playing marbles, laughing, teasing, scolding in shrill young voices. On again, up the steep rutted lane that skirts the thick fox-covert at Wood-end, and leads to the open table-land above. On between broad bare fields and ill-kept hawthorn hedges, across a stretch of raw, yellowish-red country, where

even the straight trunks and round heads of the ubiquitous elm trees do not break the dreary sameness of the landscape;—past Stoney Cross, with its four uninteresting roads and hamlet of mean, ill-looking houses, huddling about a few roods of waste land, where stand the worn steps and broken shaft of a wayside cross.—On, one long weary mile after another, with the fixed stare in his blue eyes, and the broken-hearted craving for home and rest, rode Philip Enderby.

The mare had grown quiet by this time, and her rider was thankful for it. He was nearly spent. He began to fear his strength would give out before the end of the journey. The thud of the horse's hoofs formed itself into an ever-recurring rhythm, which beat into his brain with distressing persistence. He leaned forward, and looked longingly for the first glimpse of the twisted chimneys of the cottages in Priors Bassett street.

The aspect of the weather had changed greatly during the last hour. The sun was lost behind a layer of dull grey cloud that spread rapidly, eating up the tender blue of the sky. The wind, which had been light

and variable during the morning, now blew harshly from the east; and the breath of it seemed to bleach all the land, taking the colour out of it, and making both earth and sky wan and sad.

Along Priors Bassett street Philip rode slowly. He knew every house in it, every yellow-brown sandstone gable-end, every yard of wall and painted wooden paling, every strip of garden between the low house fronts and the raised footpath skirting the road. But to-day the street seemed interminable: to-day it looked strangely vacant and forsaken. The whole interest of the place was concentrated round the forge, which glared red under its sloping slate roof, showing sharp against the darkness behind them the figures of the men working within. Some carts and farm implements in process of mending stood on the untidy patch of ground in front of it: while a company of lads loitered, in awkward, hobbledehoy fashion, about the open doors—surreptitiously appropriating scraps of old iron and other interesting refuse of the establishment when nobody happened to be looking.

Drama is conspicuous by its absence in Bassett. And Mrs. Mumford, the sour-sweet, madonna-faced wife of the worthy rector, was never tired of subsequently recounting how she and three of her dear children—precise, self-conscious little beings, by the way, their limp, fair hair curled in the smooth sausage-like manner that obtained so universally some twenty years ago, and that lingers yet in a few respectably unprogressive families—how she and the children had met Colonel Enderby that afternoon, just as they were coming out of the rectory gate. The good lady, who, with a deep-seated belief in the security of her own social position, combined a lively desire for recognition of the said position on the part of others, was sadly put about by the fact that Colonel Enderby failed, in passing, to look at her, or return her salute. Later, things explained themselves; and Mrs. Mumford had her hour of enviable notoriety.

And, in truth, the Colonel had no strength left just now for small social amenities. He rode on doggedly and resolutely; his face pale and rigid as though it had been carved

in stone, his eyes fastened on the road just in front of his horse's head. The last few miles had been as much as he could manage. The excitement that nerved him at starting had evaporated; the emotion that had quickened him when looking back at the Manor House had passed away, leaving his mind more than ever confused and dim. Pain and utter weariness of body increased upon him, and it was just as much as he could do to guide the mare and keep himself upright in the saddle. With a dull, but half-conscious sense of relief, he heard the park gate swing-to behind him.

But Bassett Darcy, on this particular afternoon, wore anything but a cheerful aspect with which to greet her returning son. The wide rolling slopes of the park showed a dirty, neutral tint, dotted here and there with the darker tones of the gnarled twisted thorn thickets. The clumps of larger trees rose gaunt and spectral through the livid easterly blight. Down on the low land, shrouding the massive house and its adjacent buildings, and spreading like a grey winding-sheet along the course of

the river, hung the fog; stagnating in the shelter, and drifting sullenly to westward, where the wind caught and drove it. The mare plunged and snorted as the rough Scotch cattle, getting up from the roadside, started away a few paces; and then, turning, stared fiercely, tossing their wild shaggy heads and wide horns in the air. The serious midland scene had, for the moment, something weird and unreal about it. And, like Sintram of old, calm of face, pure in heart, but hard beset with strange sights, strange torments, strange temptations, Philip Enderby rode down into that dreary valley of shadow.

The big house, with all its blinds drawn down, stood deserted. Silence reigned, not only indoors, but out-of-doors as well—save for the rattle of the mare's hoofs on the cobbles, as the Colonel turned her in under the stable archway. In the courtyard not a soul was to be seen.

The Colonel got off his horse with difficulty, and stood for some minutes, with his hand resting on the creature's shoulder. He was cold and cramped, and the ground

seemed to reel under his feet. Stiffly and painfully, half-stupefied with weakness, he got one of the stable doors open, and, backing the mare into an empty stall, fastened the pillar rein on either side to the rings of her bit. Then, passing through the archway again, he went away up the carriage-drive, under the double flight of stone steps, and round to the garden front of the house.

The fog streamed by, thick, chill, and clinging before the easterly wind. It veiled everything beyond an area of some few yards in grey semi-obscurity. Colonel Enderby went on, very slowly, along the terrace—the house, with its many closed windows, rising grim and dark on his left hand. He wandered on, stopping every few steps to get his breath—wandered on, hardly comprehending why or where he went, urged forward by that same terrible instinct of restlessness. Turning off the terrace, he struck down across the lawns in the direction of the little wood which clothes the promontory of land in the curve of the river. The smooth grass was slippery

with fog; the air grew more dense and clammy. It took him a long time to get down over the lawn to the outskirts of the wood. He moved uncertainly, stumbling now and then, and recovering his footing with difficulty.

There was a path through the wood somewhere, he knew, if he could only find it, leading to an old wooden boat-house and summer-house fronting on the river. Philip had not thought of the place for years: yet suddenly he was possessed with an overmastering desire to see it again.—It used to be a pleasant spot on still summer evenings. His mother liked it. She would sit there and watch Matt and him, as they punted about on the sluggish stream, angling diligently for fish which as diligently refused to be caught. If he could only find the path, he would go back there now and rest.—He was in pain: pain which grew stronger and sharper every minute: and he was so unutterably, so cruelly tired.

The fog lifted a little.

Philip pushed forward over the sodden

leaves, while fallen twigs snapped under his tread. He groped about, trying earnestly to find the path; but he could not see his way. He was half blind with pain and exhaustion.—And it was all changed, too; the underwood had grown up thick and tangled since he was here last.

He struggled on: stumbled, almost fell; got on to his feet again, struggled on a little further. He tried to raise his arm to shield his face from the low sweeping branches and briars; but he could not raise it; it was numb and nerveless.—Again he stumbled, and fell forward. He had a moment of unreasoning, passionate anger, like that of a disappointed child.—He had missed the way altogether, and got back to the outskirts of the wood again. It was unspeakably hateful to be like this—helpless, feeble, bewildered. The man's pride rebelled under it.

He leaned up against the smooth silvery trunk of a great beech on the edge of the wood. He was racked with pain; utterly desolate and despairing. Had Bassett called him home only to mock at and shame him? to make him know his own physical

infirmity and disgrace? to show him how low he had fallen?

Then, in the midst of his intolerable humiliation, a great light broke upon Philip Enderby's soul. Suddenly he understood what was about to happen. He had a perception of a mighty and final deliverance.

He braced his shoulder against the stem of the beech tree. His bodily suffering was keen and bitter: but his mind was clearer than it had been since he parted with his wife in the drawing-room of the Manor House in the morning, and with that clearness of mind came a sense of peace.

"This is death," he said to himself—"gracious, kindly death. It is coming at last. God is good, after all. He sends the recall when He sees we can't stand it any longer."

He stood and waited—awed but calm and very thankful, for the thing that should come to him.

In the last few minutes the wind had risen, scattering the fog, which rolled away in heavy, opaque masses down the valley. Philip raised his head, and looked once

more, with all the wonder of dying eyes, at the place which he loved ;—heard the rush of the wind and the call of the rooks in the high trees overhead ; heard the rabbit scurry away through the undergrowth ; heard the splash of the rising fish, and the gurgle and sweep of the river ;—saw between the tree-stems the great square house standing stately above its broad, fair lawns and shrubberies ; saw the western sky open in dull crimson between heavy bars of low-lying cloud, and the sun sink, a ball of sullen flame, behind the rounded masses of the distant woods.

“Farewell, dear old earth !” he said.
“You and I, too, have been lovers.”

The fierce agony of pain came on him again—a dreadful tearing apart of soul and body, in which the man’s faith and reason almost fainted. He staggered forward blindly for a few yards.

“Jessie, you are free,” he gasped. “Ah ! God be merciful—be merciful to me a sinner !”

Then he fell back his whole length on the ground, among the rotting leaves and the coarse grass and the sedges.

Nature strikes one as but a heartless and heedless mistress at times. She has no tears to shed even for those who have worshipped her most devoutly, when they pass out into the eternal silence. In the vast circle of her perfect order and endless fertility Death is no blot, no inscrutable mystery. It has its place duly set and apportioned; and appears, not an accident at once revolting and incomprehensible, but rather as an act of restoration. It gives back to her—worn, soiled, and tattered—the fleshly garment she lent the human spirit at its birth, to make, in due process of time, over again into new forms of freshness, wonder, and beauty.

That night at Bassett Darcy the wind swept the heavens clear of cloud, and the keen stars came out one by one in the great vault overhead, and the river slipped by, with its sweet liquid whisper, under the dark trees, between its low rush-grown banks. The rabbits played together in the dusk on the flat grass meadow; and the owls came from their covert, and sailed, on broad, silent wings, round the woods and

the house, hailing each other, in love or challenge, with ghostly hollow-voiced greetings. In the small hours of the morning the frost crept up from the stream-side, and whitened all the lawns with a glittering film of innumerable crystals. And all the while Philip Enderby, who had loved and suffered, and wrestled with temptation, and strained manfully after a noble ideal of living, lay there alone, stark and cold, his sightless blue eyes half open, and the surprise of everlasting rest on his dead lips.

What shall we say? Is it a thought of strong consolation or of terror, that the fate of each one of us matters so little; and that the great world rolls on, from age to age, serene and fearless, as careless of the birth and death of her human children as she is of the gnat that flickers through one bright hour above the swaying reed-bed, or of the hoar frost that vanishes into nothingness under the first kiss of the sun at morning? Ah! love us, in pity love us, brother mortals: for Nature, in her greatness, is deaf and blind to all our sorrow and complaining, and when we go hence nothing

stays to mourn for us either in earth or sky. Stay you, then, and mourn at least for a season.—It is vain to hope the most faithful among you will mourn us for long.

CHAPTER V.

“BENEDICK THE MARRIED MAN.”

MORE than three years have passed away. It is June—June in the south too, as you may see by the depth of shade cast by the projecting angle of the tall yellow house behind you. A garden, brilliant with flowers, cut at many different levels out on the steep hillside, with small paths, numerous flights of steps, half overgrown with creepers—a garden, the geography of which it is difficult to master at first sight, but whose charm grows upon you with acquaintance—stretches down to a wall backing a line of low, grass-grown earthworks. Beyond is a road, with a wide parapet on the further side of it; and then the dancing, sparkling, purple sea. To the right, between tall, solitary, painted houses, and looking across the

patches of vineyard and garden, you can see the city, with its great half-circle of splendid quays and buildings facing the crowded harbour. Above are the mountains. And to the west is the long sweep of the serrated coastline—sharp and clear in the sunlight, and blotted in the shadow with deep blue haze.

On the flat strip of ground between the garden wall and the earthworks, a quantity of shot is piled in black dazzling pyramids and squares : and a little farther on stands a small, grim, windowless building, before which a sentry, in white linen gaiters, pale blue uniform, and white covered *képi*, slowly paces to and fro. You have seen the spot before, reader ; but with other eyes and under other circumstances, so it is worth while to run through the list of its attractions once again.

In the deep shadow, cast by the angle of the house—with glass doors opening into a cool, vaulted, painted hall on his right, and a row of red and white oleander bushes in full flower on his left—extended in a long cane chair, and clad in the lightest of summer suits, Mr. Ames, a cigarette between his

lips, idly contemplated the brilliant scene around him. Bertie Ames has changed somewhat in these last three years. He has filled out a good deal, his figure has lost a little of its original slimness, and the expression of his dark, handsome, sleepy face has grown more decided. Heaven forbid that I should suggest that he has grown stout or truculent! To the end Mr. Ames will be a graceful-looking person, and will retain a delicate flavour of indifference and polite cynicism in manner.

His chair stood across the corner of a large, many-coloured carpet, spread on the gravel before the window; on which, half-sitting, half-lying, with a multitude of toys and infantine treasures scattered about her, Eleanor Ames played with her year-old baby—a dimpled, sturdy, brown-limbed darling, his great eyes filled with the happy content of a creature to whom the world as yet has shown only a smiling face.

A famous writer tells us that marriage is a taming process. To some women motherhood is a more taming process still. In the tender forethought, ceaseless watchfulness,

and anxiety of motherhood, Eleanor Ames had not only grown more gentle and un-exacting; but had found the truest and purest satisfactions of her life. She had not the temperament which goes to make a happy woman. Few persons whose sensibilities are keen can have that. But in this cooing, clinging morsel of humanity—whose tiny fat hands, with funny uncertain gestures, dabbed down the towers she so diligently erected for him, flinging the wooden bricks over her gown and the carpet with gurglings of the liveliest delight—she came nearer laying hold of that much-vaunted yet practically almost unknown quantity, of happiness, than ever before.

Bertie stretched himself in his long chair, and yawned a little.

“It was infernally hot on ’Change to-day,” he said, in his soft, drawling voice. “One felt like those excellent Jewish youths in the fiery furnace, with this difference—that whereas they were cast into it because they refused to worship the golden image, we cast ourselves into it voluntarily, in a spirit of emulation, to try who could

worship her most successfully. Really it is inspiring to note the vastness of one's own capacity of deterioration. I cared the very least possible about making money when I first went into business : and now I dream, not of you, Nell—don't indulge in any charming delusions upon that head—as I sit here watching your gambols with that delectable infant Bacchus, but simply and solely of dollars and cents. *Facilis descensus Averni*. That remark was made a long time ago ; but it holds good still, you know."

His wife looked up from the tower she was just completing—the baby sitting by with round, serious eyes, one thumb stuck into his rosebud of a mouth, while with the other hand he caressed his bare toes, as they protruded from under the short skirts of his full white frock.

"You enjoy making the worst of yourself, Bertie," she answered ; "and that is only a more subtle kind of self-conceit, after all."

"True," he rejoined, with admirable mildness. "But one must cultivate a certain measure of conceit to keep one's self going

at all ; and a subtle form of it is less offensive than a gross one, any way, isn't it ? ”

Eleanor turned her attention to the baby.

“ Now, sweetest, it is ready. Look ! so very high. That's right, both hands, and down it all goes,”—as the tower fell with a mimic crash to the ground.

“ You will bring that boy up to be an iconoclastic socialist and red republican, if you pander to his destructive and disorderly inclinations in this open way,” remarked Mr. Ames.

He chucked the end of his cigarette away under the red-stemmed, long-leaved oleander bushes ; and rested his elbows on the arms of his chair, pressing the tops of his fingers together as he leant back again indolently and looked at his handsome wife between half-closed eyelids.

“ The deterioration of my character,” he continued, “ was brought home very forcibly to me to-day by an encounter I had with an old acquaintance, coming stewing up the Orefici—to return to the interesting subject of myself. I feel communicative, Nell ; but it is quite unnecessary you should listen

unless you are so disposed.—I was reminded of the past, of certain passages in my experiences which were not without a touch of pathos. Just under Piola's Madonna, I ran right into the arms of that worthy little gentleman, Edmund Drake. He was quite affectionate to me, having a heavy cargo of conversation on board apparently, and no English ear wherein to discharge it. I asked him to dinner."

"Ah! I hoped we should have been alone for once to-night," said Mrs. Ames, quickly. "Somebody is always coming. I am disappointed.—My precious one, you must not suck that nasty little red horse; all the paint will come off. Come, come! give it to mother, like a good child."

"It was a Christian act, Nell, I assure you. He was absolutely explosive with the desire to find some one to whom to speak. He told me several edifying little scraps of gossip. To begin with, our dear aunt, Mrs. Murray, has had a seizure; and Cecilia is nursing her day and night like an angel. There is a rumour that a Tullingworth doctor, who is supposed once to have enter-

tained tender sentiments towards her—Cecilia, I mean; not her mother—has settled a large sum of money on that little scamp Johnnie. The doctor must be more or less of a fool. The money, of course, will go as poor Eugene's went, in ways that had best not be too closely inquired into."

Bertie Ames paused for a minute or two, and yawned again just a trifle elaborately.

"Mr. Drake inquired about Jessie," he said presently.

Eleanor bent her head low over the baby, and gently tried to remove the tempting mouthful of little red horse from between his pouting lips.

"Had he not heard, then?"

"Apparently not, so I enlightened him. I told him how Mr. Lewis J. Vandercrup's neatness of personal appearance, supported by a chocolate-brown fronted house on Fifth Avenue, a cottage at Newport, an apartment in the Boulevard Haussmann, a villa at Nice, fast trotting horses, a steam-yacht, and modest, unostentatious, little offerings in the way of packing-cases full of diamonds, had entirely won Jessie Enderby's affections.

Drake swore a little, and then asked if the marriage was a happy one. I told him we had reason to believe that the lady was perfectly satisfied, and that the gentleman had attained his highest ambition in possessing the most expensive wife in New York, which, I imagine, is saying a good deal. Upon that, I grieve to say, Mr. Drake became extremely blasphemous. It was specially awkward, for two virginal, high-nosed Englishwomen, in green gauze veils, were looking in furtively at the shop windows just behind us. Why, I wonder," added Mr. Ames, with an air of gentle inquiry, "do Englishwomen always look in at shop windows furtively, as though they were in the act of committing a petty larceny, and were afraid of being taken red-handed?—However, I bore with him. He appeared so extremely apoplectic that I fancied it would be wiser to let him have it out. When he had blown off his steam, he asked after you. He was good enough to bracket me with poor Colonel Enderby; to tell me I had always known which side my bread was buttered; to intimate that I was

an acute person, and, matrimonially, had got very much the best of the bargain."

"What did you answer, Bertie?" asked Eleanor, looking up at him suddenly, with a flush on her cheek.

"Ah! my dear," he cried, half laughing, "you don't need to have that recounted at this time of day, do you? Surely, now, it is quite a matter of ancient history."

The flush deepened in Mrs. Ames's cheek. She drew the baby towards her, and pressed her face against his fat brown shoulder.

"There are some chapters of ancient history a woman can hardly read too often," she said, perhaps a trifle proudly.

"Your husband must be a brute if he does not love you, Nell," rejoined Bertie.

He stretched out his hand over the arm of his chair towards her as he spoke. The baby clutched at it with soft dimpled fingers, raised himself bravely into a standing position, stuck first one foot and then the other straight out in front of him—having still a greater inclination to regard those members as agreeable playfellows than as serious aids to the process of locomotion:

and finally, losing his balance, descended with a flop in a sitting posture upon the carpet again. The said flop jarred his small person, and he gazed round with a piteous and tearful demand for sympathy.

"It serves you right, you officious little animal," his father said. "It wasn't your hand I wanted, you know, but your mother's."

Eleanor rose to her feet, picked up the child, and stood, a stately well-poised figure, her head raised, and the black lace she wore falling in dusky folds over her shoulders, looking out far across the glittering bay.

"Ah! poor Philip Enderby," she cried suddenly. "I am frightened when I think of him as I stand here with my boy in my arms, in the midst of all this ease and beauty and comfort. God forgive me, if I did him a cruel injury!"

Bertie smiled quietly; and shaded his eyes with his hand as he looked at her, so as to get a better view. Undeniably his wife appeared to great advantage just now.

"You have still rather an excessive way

of stating things, Nell," he said, in his rich, sweet tones. "There is quite another point of view from which the question may be regarded, and to which I venture to call your attention. If he had married Cecilia years ago, if he had never fallen in love with that fascinating being, Jessie—mark you, I don't join in Mr. Drake's anathemas by any means—Colonel Enderby would have remained a very ordinary, prejudiced, stiff-necked English soldier and gentleman, and the world would never have dreamed of what he was capable. You gave him his opportunity. He had the wit to take it. He became something of a hero. Of course, heroism demands certain sacrifices. Well, I must say Colonel Enderby made them in a very praiseworthy manner. He never liked me, but I bear him no malice, you see; I do him justice."

She turned to him rather sternly.

"Don't jest about this, Bertie," she said. "Let us keep a few memories sacred. Let there be a few things we don't push aside with an easy shrug of the shoulders and a cynical laugh."

Bertie Ames sat up, and a strange expression crossed his face. His eyes were sad enough still at moments. They were very sad now, as he looked full and steadily at his wife.

"My dear Nell, you are guilty of doing me a slight injustice," he answered. "Perhaps I have paid a more practical tribute to Colonel Enderby's memory than any one else, after all. I don't want to exalt my own small virtues; but remember, I found myself left alone, under highly critical circumstances, with his widow, who, being at daggers drawn with all her friends and neighbours, was thrown with rather dangerous completeness upon my hands."

He rose to his feet, came over, and, standing by his wife, rested his hand lightly on her shoulder, and then kissed the baby, as it lay smiling in her arms.

"I am not a very sentimental person," he went on gently, "but I don't put quite everything aside, Nell, with a laugh and shrug of the shoulders—even so. I often think of the frosty February morning, with the pale, primrose-coloured sun-

rise, after that wretched night of fruitless search, when Drake and I found Philip Enderby lying under the bare trees beside that quiet English river.—It was a thing one does not easily forget. I should be very glad to know that my face would have no worse secrets to tell than that man's had when I, too, lie dead.—There, there! what's the matter with you? Why, my dear, you are charmingly soft-hearted!—But here's Parker, looking for all the world as if she thought I'd been beating you, coming to fetch the baby. It's time for you to go in and dress. Put on a nice gown, and finish the conquest of good little Drake. I like to hear men say my wife is the handsomest woman, of her age, in Genoa, you know."

When he was alone, Bertie Ames lay back comfortably in his long chair again. The deep shadow of the house got narrow and narrower as the sun moved towards the west; there were sweet scents in the air from the blooming garden, and a low murmur of the sea and of the distant turmoil and life of the great urgent city.

Bertie had been a good deal stirred some-

how, and he did not altogether enjoy it. In matters of feeling he was still decidedly indolent. Emotion is a dangerous, unstable thing, the mother of innumerable follies. He did his best, therefore, to eschew her company.

Meanwhile, round the end of the house, stopping nervously every minute or two, with rapid angry glances and quick liftings of the eyebrows, came a very woebegone, little figure. The monkey scuffled along near the ground, holding up the links of a broken chain, that dangled from a broad leathern band round his waist, in one thin, skinny hand. He crept under the shelter of the oleanders, and waited there, peering anxiously about him, chattering to himself, and showing his broken, discoloured teeth, half in wickedness and half in fear—reaching up now and then as he squatted on his haunches, and scratching his ugly old head, with the hand that was disengaged, in deep perplexity.

Bertie Ames rolled himself another cigarette, struck a match and lighted it. As he did so, Malvolio crawled out from his

hiding-place, and came and cowered silently against his master's knee.

"Ah, you abominable little sinner!" said the latter, looking down at the creature. "You've broken your chain, and got loose again, then, have you?"

Malvolio sidled closer to him, gazing up with an air of pathetic misery into his face. With all his affectation of cynicism and dislike of emotion, Mr. Ames was at bottom very tender-hearted. He picked up the monkey, held it in his arms, and began fondling it.

"You are very faithful, you poor little devil," he said gently. "It seems hardly fair to have you banished and beaten because you had just humanity enough in you to get an acute attack of jealousy, and try to bite and belabour that reigning favourite of the establishment, the baby.—But you can't expect to indulge your small eccentricities with impunity any more than the rest of us. In a way, it is a compliment to the primeval ape, our common ancestress, and proves her claims, that both branches of her descendants, notwithstanding slight outward dif-

ferences, should be judged by the same law."

Bertie Ames mused for a few seconds in silence, softly patting the dismal-looking little beast that nestled against him.

"No," he went on presently; "you cannot expect to get off scot-free any more than others, Malvolio. There is a price set on everything in this world. Not only on vice, and ugliness, and crime, and weakness, and folly: but on love, and youth, and beauty, and virtue, and faith, and honour as well. And we all pay it rigorously."

He shrugged his shoulders, and laughed a little.

"Pay it? Good heavens! I should just think we did. We pay it down to the uttermost farthing."

THE END.

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